



MUGA PROJECT

COUNTERING INFORMATION THREATS IN MOLDOVA,
UKRAINE, GEORGIA, AND ARMENIA

Study of the Information Environment:

MOLDOVA

INFO OPS
POLSKA



www.infoops.pl | www.dfrlab.org



MUGA Project

Study of the Information Environment: MOLDOVA

The MUGA Project is implemented by the INFO OPS Polska Foundation and the DFRLab (Atlantic Council).



The project is funded by the state budget under the competition of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland *“Public Diplomacy 2024–2025 – the European Dimension and Countering Disinformation”*.

The publication reflects solely the views of the authors and cannot be equated with the official position of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland.



Ministerstwo
Spraw Zagranicznych

Index of content

Introduction	4
1. Information Environment – Characteristics	6
a) Traditional Media (TV, Press, Radio, Web Portals).....	6
i. State-owned.....	6
ii. Private.....	7
iii. Regional.....	9
iv. Affiliated with Specific Groups (Political, Religious, Ethnic)	11
v. Foreign.....	13
b) Non-traditional Media (bloggers, influencers, social media, YouTube, etc.).....	15
i. Affiliated.....	16
ii. Unaffiliated (Anonymous).....	17
iii. Affiliated with Specific Groups (Political, Religious, Ethnic)	18
iv. Foreign.....	20
v. Cyclical Events and Nationwide as well as Regional Initiatives.....	21
c) Non-Governmental and Other Non-State Organizations Influencing Public Opinion	22
d) Economic Entities with the Potential to Influence the Shape and Accessibility of Content...24	
2. Information Habits of Society.....	25
a) Viewership and Perception of Traditional Media.....	25
b) Popularity of online sources, including unverified ones	32
c) Popularity of Foreign Media	37
d) Susceptibility to “Bazaar Information,” Including Conspiracy Theories	39
e) Recognition of Religious Institutions as a Source of Information.....	43
3. Key FIMI Resources.....	49
a) Companies.....	49
b) NGOs	53
c) Opinion Leaders.....	56
d) Religious Leaders	58
e) Political Leaders.....	59
f) Military Leaders (Transnistria as a proxy)	61
g) Traditional Media	63

h) Non-Traditional Media.....	65
i) Academic and Scientific Cooperation.....	66
j) Military Cooperation and Non-State Armed Formations.....	68
4. Selected techniques and tactics of manipulation, linguistic mechanisms of persuasion, actions and psychological effects – identification and analysis.....	69
5. Propaganda, Manipulation, and Disinformation Activities Targeting Perceptions of the West and Democratic Values.....	83
a) Externally motivated	83
b) Internally motivated.....	84
c) Examples of activities.....	84
6. Propaganda, manipulation, and disinformation activities targeting the perception of Poland....	99
a) Externally motivated	100
b) Internally motivated.....	100
c) Examples of activities.....	100
7. Case study – analysis of a narrative targeting Poland based on the DISARM model.....	111
8. Case Study – Election Interference.....	118
9. Recommendations	124
a) Summary of the information environment.....	124
b) Strategic analysis – the impact of the regional situation on Poland’s strategic objectives...	127
c) Training	131
d) Implementation	132
e) Information activities	133
f) R&D development.....	133

Introduction

In recent years, Moldova has faced dynamically evolving threats related to propaganda and disinformation activities. The country's geopolitical location – at the intersection of Eastern and Western influences – as well as its internal political and social challenges, make Moldovan society particularly vulnerable to information manipulation. The consequences of such manipulation become especially visible during pre-election periods, highlighting the scale of the threat that disinformation poses to modern democracy. For Moldova, which is actively seeking integration with the European Union, countering disinformation is becoming a key element not only in the pursuit of political and social stability, but also in protecting democratic foundations.

Moldova's efforts to integrate with European democratic structures are hindered by strong external influences, particularly Russian, which interfere in the country's internal politics and are aimed at shaping public perception. Shared history, cultural ties, and the presence of Russian media and organizations in the country contribute to the fact that many Moldovans remain receptive to Kremlin propaganda. The dissemination of pro-Russian narratives is part of a broader geopolitical strategy designed to maintain Russia's influence in the region and weaken Moldova's integration with the West. Foreign interference and influence operations often go beyond Moldova's borders, also affecting foreign audiences. In doing so, they impact the region's political, social, and economic stability. Moldova therefore faces the challenge of ensuring its citizens have access to credible, reliable information, while at the same time strengthening its own democratic institutions. The development of media literacy and civil society are key elements in strengthening Moldova's political independence as well as enhancing information security in the region.

The purpose of this report is to conduct comprehensive research on the resilience of Moldovan society to disinformation and to identify threats to the stability of Moldova's information environment. Examining the mechanisms of information manipulation makes it possible, among other things, to analyze the information environment and the susceptibility of Moldovans to disinformation, as well as to assess the level of resilience to threats coming from the information domain. The report therefore presents the characteristics of both traditional and non-traditional media operating in Moldova's infosphere, as well as other actors – organizations or companies – with the potential to influence the form and availability of information. Of key importance in studying manipulation mechanisms are the information habits of Moldovan society, which determine the type of content consumed and the way it is interpreted. For decades, Moldova's information space has been dominated by Russian state television channels, newspapers, and radio stations, which have managed to firmly entrench their positions. The support given to them by Moldovan politicians coordinated by Moscow favors a situation in which influence operations in the information sphere remain a primary tool of manipulation, also managed by Russian special services. In this context, the report analyzes the popularity and perception of traditional and online media, including foreign outlets. It also examines Moldovans' susceptibility to conspiracy theories and their approach to religious sources of information. Furthermore, the potential of foreign information manipulations and external interference has been assessed. Propaganda, manipulative, and disinformation activities targeting perceptions of the West, democratic values, and Poland have been identified, making it possible to distinguish specific techniques and tactics used in psychological operations.

The findings and recommendations presented in the report are intended to support policymakers, civil society organizations, and international partners in strengthening Moldova's resilience to disinformation. They represent another step toward ensuring better protection for Moldovan society against harmful activities, and consequently, toward enhancing information security in the region. Understanding the mechanisms of information manipulation and the consequences of disinformation is becoming a key element of the strategy that will enable Moldova to resist external influence, consolidate its political independence, and pave the way for full integration with the European Union.

1. Information Environment – Characteristics

The media play a key role in shaping public opinion, acting as an intermediary between world events and society. This influence is manifested in the selection and presentation of information, which can alter the perception of reality, reinforce certain views, or shape attitudes toward important social, political, or economic issues. By employing persuasion techniques, selective reporting, or narratives aligned with a specific ideology, the media can deepen existing social divisions or promote particular political interests, thus serving as a tool of influence over the attitudes of individuals and social groups. The media market in Moldova is small, yet its structure includes both state-controlled outlets and private entities.

a) Traditional Media (TV, Press, Radio, Web Portals)

i. State-owned

Although Moldovan state media play a key role in providing public information, they are often perceived as instruments of power, susceptible to political influence. The most important Moldovan public broadcaster, *TeleRadio-Moldova (TRM)*, has been criticized for excessively favoring state authorities. Its main television channel, *Moldova1*, offers news, entertainment, educational, and cultural content. Operating in the public interest, the channel promotes national values and supports Moldovan identity. *Moldova2* expands the offer with additional entertainment, sports, and documentary content. TRM's main radio station is *Radio Moldova*, which broadcasts news, music, educational, and cultural programs in Romanian (identical to Moldovan). It reaches a large part of the Moldovan population, including rural areas where other traditional media are less accessible.

Under TRM's management, *Radio Moldova Muzical* and *Radio Moldova Tineret* target specific market segments. The former focuses on classical music and artistic events, while the latter is aimed at youth and young adults, offering content related to pop music, education, careers, and lifestyle. Over the years, multiple attempts have been made to reform TRM, a process that accelerated in July 2021 after the parliamentary elections, in which the Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) gained a majority. The new media law introduced, among other things, more transparent mechanisms for appointing members of TRM's supervisory board, reducing the risk of

political interference. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Maia Sandu's administration also took measures to reduce the influence of pro-Russian content in Moldovan media, restricting the retransmission of Russian TV channels accused of spreading pro-Russian disinformation.

Public media in Moldova are less focused on print, though there are journals associated with state institutions or funded by the state. One of the most important state newspapers is *Moldova Suverană*, which has the status of an official gazette and focuses on domestic politics, analyses, and commentary. By contrast, the Russian-language *Nezavisimaya Moldova* (*Independent Moldova*) is attributed with a pro-Russian editorial line, offering news on politics, economics, culture, and international relations.

The main online news source in Moldova managed by the public broadcaster is *trm.md*, which provides coverage of social issues, cultural events, and politics. Official government information, including decrees, decisions, and press releases, is available on the official website of the *Moldpress Information Agency* – *moldpres.md*. This portal serves as a source of official government communications and provides access to official documents. Additional information on the work of government institutions can be found on *gov.md* (the official Moldovan government portal), *presedinte.md* (the official presidential website), and *parlament.md* (the official website of the Moldovan parliament).

ii. Private

Private broadcasters play a dominant role in Moldova's media landscape, although many have lost their broadcasting licenses due to allegations of spreading Russian disinformation. An example is *Publika TV*, one of the largest private broadcasters, which was part of the *General Media Group* holding formerly owned by oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc. Another influential outlet of the group was *Prime TV*, which retransmitted programs from the Russian channel *Pervyj Kanal*, broadcasting in both Romanian (Moldovan) and Russian. The retransmission of Russian content was also carried out by *RTR Moldova*, popular among pro-Russian viewers, whose broadcasting license was suspended by the Commission for Exceptional Situations in December 2022. Ultimately, in December 2023, the station's owners voluntarily relinquished the license. Broadcast

licenses were also withdrawn from *Accent TV*, which retransmitted Russian *NTV* programs, as well as from *NTV Moldova* itself as part of the *NTV* network.

Stations such as *Jurnal TV* and *TV8*, on the other hand, are accused of having a pro-Western orientation and favoring pro-European parties such as the Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS). They frequently cover issues of corruption and oligarchy, presenting content that supports Moldova's stronger ties with the European Union. European integration and pro-Western political movements are also promoted by the Moldovan branch of Romanian *Pro TV – Pro TV Chişinău* – one of the most influential and recognizable private broadcasters in the country.

The print press market in Moldova is shrinking as digital media gain popularity. Nevertheless, the newspaper *Ziarul de Gardă* is considered a reliable source of information, relying on investigative journalism covering corruption, abuse of power, and social issues. The newspaper *Timpu*, critical of pro-Russian political forces, addresses political, economic, and social topics while promoting integration with the European Union. Among the Russian-speaking minority, *Komsomolskaya Pravda Moldova* – the Moldovan branch of the Russian newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda* – enjoys popularity. It promotes narratives aligned with Kremlin policy, focusing on political, social, and cultural issues in both Moldova and Russia.

Radio remains popular, especially in rural regions. *Radio Noroc* and *Radio Plai* provide diverse news and music programming. The latter station has a predominantly entertainment profile, though it also broadcasts news. It is considered apolitical and attracts listeners seeking non-political content. *Russkoe Radio Moldova*, part of the Russian *Russkoe Radio* network, broadcasts Russian-language music and news programs aimed at Moldova's pro-Russian community.

Private online portals also reflect Moldova's political divisions. The pro-Western *agora.md* focuses on politics, economics, and social issues. European integration and democratic reforms are promoted by *unimedia.info* and *deschide.md*, while *Sputnik Moldova* – the Moldovan branch of the Russian-language Sputnik news agency – has been criticized for spreading Russian disinformation, particularly regarding foreign policy. By contrast, *point.md* is not strongly associated with either a pro-Western or pro-Russian orientation and is regarded as a relatively balanced outlet.

iii. Regional

The importance of traditional regional media in Moldova is growing in the context of the country's significant cultural-linguistic and political diversity, including Russia's activities around Transnistria and Gagauzia. Regional media are exposed to political pressure and usually reflect local political trends. Those that seek to maintain greater independence often lack sufficient financial and organizational resources, which limits their capacity to influence public opinion.

Transnistria, the separatist region in eastern Moldova, poses a serious challenge to the country's security and stability. Since declaring unilateral independence in 1990, the region has remained an unrecognized "quasi-state," politically, economically, and militarily supported by Russia. Its existence complicates Moldova's integration processes with the European Union and NATO, while also keeping Moldova within the direct reach of Russian active measures. Russia uses Transnistria as a tool of political pressure on Moldova, employing hybrid warfare methods, including propaganda, cyberattacks, and social destabilization. The region also serves as a platform for spreading pro-Russian narratives in Moldova through media controlled by the self-proclaimed Transnistrian "authorities."

The self-proclaimed authorities of the so-called Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (PMR) oversee Transnistrian television, focusing on the *Pervyy Pridnestrovskiy* (First Transnistrian) channel, formerly known as TV PMR. The channel broadcasts programs in Russian, among other languages, and promotes separatist sentiments. It actively develops its presence on social networks and online platforms, using YouTube, Telegram, Viber, Instagram, TikTok, Odnoklassniki, VKontakte, and Facebook. Pro-Russian narratives are also disseminated by *Radio Pridnestrovye* and the official PMR news agency *Novosti Pridnestrovya* (News of Transnistria). One of the main online information sources in the separatist region remains *tiras.ru*.

Gagauzia, an autonomous region in southern Moldova inhabited mainly by the Gagauz population, formally remains part of Moldova but maintains special ties with separatist Transnistria. Both Gagauzia and Transnistria are regions where Russian influence is strong. Moscow supports them as tools of pressure on Moldova, exploiting their pro-Russian attitudes and resistance to European integration. Shared pro-Russian narratives and political contacts between the leaders of both regions exacerbate geopolitical tensions. These regions are dominated by pro-

Russian media narratives, which fuel resistance to Western reforms and create a united front against pro-European policies.

In Gagauzia, the most important regional broadcaster is *Gagauziya Radio Televizionu (GRT) Public Company*, a pro-Russian public institution that includes *TV Gagauzia* and *GRT FM*. The company is governed by a Supervisory Board of nine members appointed by the People's Assembly of Gagauzia for four-year terms. Its powers significantly limit the editorial independence of the broadcaster, enabling political actors to exert influence over GRT's operations. *TV Gagauzia*, which broadcasts programs in Gagauz, Romanian (Moldovan), and Russian, was included in 2022 in the national multiplex of digital terrestrial television, covering 98% of Moldova's territory. The programs and broadcasts produced by GRT are intended to contribute to "the unity, strengthening, and development of Gagauzia's civil society, the revival of cultural and spiritual values among the inhabitants of the autonomy, especially young people (...)." Their declared purpose is to instill patriotism, promote the history, traditions, and culture of the Gagauz people, and foster respect for human rights, while their "special mission" is to support "the identity of Gagauzia." These goals are also pursued by other regional media, including the newspapers *Ana Sözü* and *Vesti Gagauzii*, as well as the online portal *gagauzia.md*. Gagauz media thus provide coverage of local political, cultural, and social issues, and their broadcasts and publications reflect the region's specific character.

In Moldova's second-largest city, Bălți, both pro-European/pro-Western groups and pro-Russian groups are active. Although ethnic Moldovans form the majority of the region's population, Russian remains the dominant language in the city's socio-cultural life, education, and administration. The large Russian-speaking population and strong historical and cultural ties with Russia mean that Bălți is perceived as a pro-Russian region, which is also reflected in local media narratives. The local community draws information from *Bălți TV* and its affiliated portal *Bălți TV Online*, which mainly cover current events in northern Moldova. One of the main print sources of information in the region is the newspaper *SP*, whose online version has developed as a separate media product. In 2023, the site recorded over 300,000 monthly visits.

In the Orhei area – closely associated with pro-Russian politician *Ilan Șor*, former MP and mayor of Orhei, and leader of the banned Șor Party – regional programming was broadcast by *TV Orhei*,

whose license was suspended in December 2022. *TV Orhei* was a Moldovan television channel also linked to Șor. The channel acted as a medium supporting Șor's political and propaganda interests. While it focused on local socio-cultural events and community issues, it also contained a significant share of propagandistic and pro-Russian content. The station has been accused of using media manipulation and violating the principles of media pluralism. Programs broadcast on *TV Orhei* often contained content consistent with pro-Russian narratives promoted by the Kremlin's main propaganda outlets. Similar messaging was delivered by the *Orhei* news portal and the local *Radio Orhei* station, which offered news, music, and cultural programs in both Russian and Romanian. Like *TV Orhei*, *Radio Orhei* is tied to Ilan Șor and his political party. The station broadcast content supportive of the Șor Party's policies, promoting populist narratives and programming aimed mainly at the residents of Orhei. While primarily focused on a local audience, *Radio Orhei* has also reached wider audiences across Moldova through online streaming and the growing importance of digital media. The station offers a mix of music, news, and commentary, with particular emphasis on local news and initiatives undertaken by Orhei's authorities, often including the promotion of Șor's projects. The station has been criticized for favoring pro-Russian and populist narratives.

At the regional level, there are also media initiatives supported by non-governmental organizations, promoting democratic values, freedom of expression, and the fight against disinformation. These objectives are pursued, for example, by the *MediaPoint* information agency, which encourages local communities to share experiences and information about local events within the framework of citizen journalism.

iv. Affiliated with Specific Groups (Political, Religious, Ethnic)

In Moldova's information environment, there are many media outlets affiliated with specific political, ethnic, or religious groups. The content they disseminate reflects the interests of their sponsors and is usually targeted at particular social groups.

Media supporting specific political parties are mostly private and serve as tools in the hands of oligarchs promoting their interests. This phenomenon was clearly illustrated by the influence of Vladimir Plahotniuc, former leader of the Democratic Party of Moldova (PDM), who left the country after the political crisis of June 2019. During his rule, narratives favorable to the PDM

were promoted by *Publika TV*, *Canal 2*, *Canal 3*, and *Prime TV*, all part of the *General Media Group* media holding previously controlled by Plahotniuc. Due to accusations of spreading pro-Russian propaganda, the television stations belonging to the holding lost their broadcasting licenses. However, *Prime TV* remains associated with retransmitting Russia's *Pervyj Kanal*. Other retransmitters of Russian programming included *NTV Moldova* and *Accent TV*, linked to the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM), led by Igor Dodon. Narratives favorable to pro-Russian parties were also supported by Russia-sponsored *Sputnik Moldova*, part of the broader Sputnik media network.

In the Orhei region, populist media outlets are used by pro-Russian politician *Ilan Șor*, who through *TV Orhei* and other local outlets criticized pro-Western forces in Moldova. Supporters of Șor also use the official website of the Șor Party to disseminate their messages. In contrast, pro-European private TV stations such as *Jurnal TV* and *TV8* – known for their criticism of oligarchic influence – serve as a counterbalance to oligarch-affiliated media.

Media linked to ethnic groups reflect their specific linguistic and cultural needs. In the autonomous region of Gagauzia, *TV Gagauzia* and *GRT FM* are public broadcasters mainly serving the Gagauz minority. They promote pro-Russian narratives in line with the prevailing sentiments in the region and broadcast in three languages: Gagauz, Russian, and Romanian (identical to Moldovan). The private regional newspaper *Gagauz Sesi*, published in Gagauzia, focuses on issues relevant to the Gagauz minority. In Bălți, a northern Moldovan region inhabited by a large Russian-speaking minority, the newspaper *SP* is published in both Romanian and Russian. For the Russian-speaking population of Transnistria, the *Tiras.ru* portal plays a central role. Based in the separatist region, it is one of the main online media in the unrecognized quasi-state. The portal publishes news about the region, Moldova, Russia, and international events, consistently presenting content aligned with pro-Russian narratives. It often portrays Moldova, Ukraine, and Western countries in a negative light while promoting Russia as the main ally and guarantor of regional stability. The portal spreads disinformation and propaganda narratives consistent with Kremlin policy. Its publications frequently heighten tensions between Transnistria and Moldova while legitimizing the region's separatist aspirations. *Tiras.ru* operates within the media system controlled by Transnistrian authorities and serves as a propaganda tool.

Although religious media in Moldova are less popular than politically or ethnically oriented outlets, they can serve as instruments for promoting traditional Orthodox values. Religious and spiritual content for Moldovan believers is provided by the private portal *Orthodox.md*, affiliated with the Moldovan Orthodox Church (Metropolis of Chişinău and All Moldova), which is subordinated to the Moscow Patriarchate. It is an important communication channel for the Church, used to disseminate its teachings and positions on religious as well as social issues. The portal often takes a conservative stance on social matters such as family, education, and morality. Its content reflects the pro-Russian position of the Moldovan Metropolis, which is significant in the context of Moldova's geopolitical and religious tensions. Due to its ties with the Moscow Patriarchate, the portal's activity is criticized by supporters of the Metropolis of Bessarabia, which is subordinated to the Romanian Patriarchate. *Orthodox.md* is also perceived as a tool for promoting pro-Russian narratives, raising concerns regarding Moldova's geopolitical independence.

v. Foreign

Among foreign traditional media present in the Moldovan media market, Russian and Romanian outlets dominate. Western and Ukrainian media also exert some influence on public opinion, though to a lesser extent.

Russian media enjoy considerable popularity among the Russian-speaking part of Moldovan society, especially in regions with pro-Russian sympathies, such as Transnistria and Gagauzia. One of the most popular Russian TV channels is *Pervyj Kanal*, which until October 2023 was retransmitted by the Moldovan station *Prime TV* (its license was suspended due to spreading Kremlin propaganda). Pro-Russian content is also provided by the newspaper *Argumenty i Fakty*, the *Komsomolskaya Pravda* portal, the *Rossiya 24* channel, and *NTV* and *REN TV*, which until December 2022 were retransmitted by *NTV Moldova*. The suspension of broadcasting licenses for pro-Russian TV channels in December 2022 and again in October 2023 limited Moldovan audiences' access to pro-Russian narratives. In pro-Russian regions, however, this was interpreted as a restriction of free speech and as repression against sympathetic media. In February 2022, Moldova's Commission for Exceptional Situations (*Comisia pentru Situații Excepționale a Republicii Moldova*) also blocked access to *Sputnik Moldova*, controlled by the Russian news

agency *Rossiya Segodnya*. Users, however, could bypass the block using Virtual Private Networks (VPNs). A popular transmission space for pro-Russian content has also become the channels of social media “influencers,” through which such content continues to reach specific audience groups. The restrictions on access to Russian propaganda did not significantly reduce the availability of such content, as audiences adapted their information-consumption habits.

Pro-European and Romanian-speaking Moldovans, particularly in the north and center of the country, consume Romanian media content more frequently. They often access the digital version of Romania’s respected daily *Adevărul*. *Adevarul.ro* is one of the most important and popular news portals in Romania, offering a wide range of news, analyses, and opinion pieces. The portal is part of *Adevarul Holding*, a media group also known for publishing the traditional newspaper *Adevărul*, which has a long history as one of the leading media outlets in both Romania and Moldova. Readers also have access to the print version of the paper, though its circulation is declining in line with the general drop in printed press readership.

As in many other countries, Moldova is experiencing a significant decline in print media readership. This trend stems from several key socio-economic, technological, and cultural factors shaping the contemporary media landscape. The internet and social media have become the dominant sources of information in Moldova, particularly among younger generations. Digital platforms offer easy, fast, and free access to news, making print press less attractive.

Among these audiences, Romania’s *Europa FM* radio station also enjoys popularity. It is regarded in both Romania and Moldova as one of the most reliable sources of information. Its news and commentary programs emphasize values linked to European integration. Pro-European content is also provided by *TVR Moldova*, the Moldovan branch of Romania’s public broadcaster *TVR*, and by the Romanian news channel *Digi24*. Another highly popular Romanian channel among Moldovans is *Pro TV*. Although its Moldovan version (*Pro TV Chişinău*) is part of the local media space, the original Romanian channel continues to attract a large audience.

Pro-European and pro-Western audiences also turn to Western outlets, with *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* – broadcasting in Moldova as *Radio Europa Liberă* – playing a leading role. Moldovan audiences are also exposed to Western perspectives through *BBC News* (*BBC World Service*), consuming its content in both English and Russian. In Moldova’s eastern and northern

regions, especially near the Ukrainian border, the Ukrainian TV channel *1+1* attracts local viewers. The Ukrainian news portal *UNIAN*, offering political analyses among other content, is also popular with Moldovan audiences.

Efforts to improve transparency in public debate and counter disinformation in the media are also pursued by the Romanian media platform *veridica.ro*, which is very active in Moldova. It focuses on monitoring disinformation, particularly pro-Russian narratives. Its work results in detailed analyses of emerging political narratives. *Veridica.ro* is a Romanian online portal specializing in analyzing disinformation, propaganda, and false narratives in Central and Eastern Europe, with particular focus on Romania, Moldova, and the post-Soviet states. The portal was established to counter disinformation influence – especially from Russia – and to promote fact-based, reliable journalism. *Veridica.ro* publishes analyses, reports, investigative articles, and expert commentary on politics, media, and security. It also provides educational content, helping audiences better understand the mechanisms of disinformation. While targeted mainly at audiences in Romania and Moldova, its content also has international reach, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe. The portal publishes articles in both Romanian and English.

b) Non-traditional Media (bloggers, influencers, social media, YouTube, etc.)

Social media play an increasingly important role in Moldova as a primary source of information, communication, and entertainment. In a country where traditional media – such as the printed press – are losing significance, social platforms have become a key tool for citizens as well as for politicians, civil society organizations, and interest groups. In Moldova, social media are increasingly replacing traditional outlets as the main source of news. Users follow both the official accounts of media outlets and independent journalists or bloggers. Politicians actively use social media to run election campaigns, communicate with voters, and promote their ideas. Facebook and Instagram have become key platforms in the struggle for political influence. At the same time, social media serve as tools for propaganda and disinformation, particularly in the context of Russian influence operations. Pro-Russian narratives, false information, and manipulative content are widely disseminated not only on platforms such as VKontakte and Odnoklassniki, but also on Facebook and X (formerly Twitter).

i. Affiliated

Social media in Moldova, much like traditional media, often reflect specific political preferences. State institutions use them primarily to disseminate official communications, decisions, and updates on politics, the economy, or crisis situations. The most commonly used platforms for these purposes are Facebook, Telegram, X, and YouTube. The Moldovan Presidency communicates with citizens via Facebook, X, and YouTube, while also using TikTok and Instagram to reach the younger part of society. The Moldovan government maintains official accounts on these same platforms. Popular sources of information include, for example, the accounts of the Moldovan Border Police on Facebook and Telegram, which mainly publish data on border traffic and activities aimed at ensuring internal security.

Many traditional media outlets also use social media to distribute their content. Active accounts on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, X, and Telegram are maintained by *TVR Moldova*, *Pro TV Chişinău*, and *Ziarul de Gardă*. Popular Moldovan online media such as *deschide.md* and *agora.md* also increase their reach through these platforms.

Among affiliated accounts spreading pro-Russian content on social media, notable examples include profiles connected with the autonomous region of Transnistria, such as *Benderi Info* on Telegram and *Novosti Pridnestrovia* on Telegram and YouTube. *Bălţi Online*, originating from Bălţi – the second-largest city in Moldova – runs accounts on Facebook, Instagram, Telegram, and YouTube. Evghenia Guţul, Moldovan politician and, since 2023, the *bashkan* (governor) of Gagauzia, runs a popular Telegram channel promoting Russian narratives. Her communication is based on pro-Russian messaging and the narrative of the Şor Party.

On Telegram, a pro-Russian perspective is also presented by the popular channel *Специально для RT* (“Specially for RT”), linked to *Russia Today*, as well as by *Moldova Express*. The latter is operated by the PR company *PR-Expert*, founded by Vladimir Dzhabir, former deputy chairman of the Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova (PCRM). Despite its decline in popularity, the PCRM continues to play a significant role in Moldovan politics as a symbol of the Soviet past and as an opposition force against pro-European tendencies. The party was founded in 1993 as a continuation of the Communist Party of Moldova, which had existed during the Soviet Union.

After the USSR's collapse, communist parties were banned, but the PCRM resumed its activity, adapting to the new political reality.

The political use of TikTok is also becoming increasingly widespread. Strong anti-government rhetoric has been disseminated on the platform by figures such as Bogdan Țîrdea, Igor Dodon, Ilan Șor, Alexei Lungu, Vasile Bolea, and the aforementioned Evghenia Guțul. At the same time, the demand for content countering disinformation on TikTok is being addressed by other online creators: Mihai Avasiloiu (*stop.fals.moldova*) and TVR Moldova journalist Irina Bejenaru (*fakt_or_fake*).

ii. Unaffiliated (Anonymous)

Unaffiliated social media accounts are those that have no official ties to the organizations, institutions, or individuals they claim to represent, or that operate independently of them. Their activity poses multiple potential risks, both to individual users and to institutions, societies, and national security.

The use of unaffiliated accounts in social media to shape public opinion is a common practice in both influence operations and marketing. In 2023, social activist and artist Alex Buretz drew attention to the steadily growing activity of fake Facebook profiles that, under foreign-sounding names, intensively shared content related to Ilan Șor, thereby promoting pro-Russian narratives and mobilizing support for the politician. In research conducted jointly with the *Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab)*, 36 fake accounts were identified, suggesting organized activity as part of a coordinated campaign that could be interpreted as Kremlin interference in Moldova's presidential elections and the referendum on joining the European Union. To avoid detection, fake profiles adopted various strategies, such as changing profile pictures or names, to suggest supposed links to Moldova. Examples include renaming the account "*Fitness Fanatics Literary Lovers Creative Concepts*" to "*Acasă în Moldova*" (Eng. "*At Home in Moldova*"), or "*Green Living Creative Corner Local Love*" to "*Moldova Pioniera*" (Eng. "*Pioneering Moldova*"). According to DFRLab, the same practice can also be observed among many other pages that publish seemingly neutral content on a daily basis but at specific moments synchronize their activity by spreading paid campaigns against the European Union.

On Telegram, anonymous channels with significant reach and influence potential have in recent years been particularly active in spreading anti-Western and pro-Russian content. These include *Moldavskiy Piston*, *MoldBrief*, *Gagauzskaya Respublika*, *Smuglianka*, *Pravda Gagauzii*, *Moldavski Vagon*, *Geniy Karpat*, and *Pridnestrovec*. The last of these has approximately 72,000 followers.

iii. Affiliated with Specific Groups (Political, Religious, Ethnic)

Although many online creators in Moldova are connected to specific political, ethnic, or religious groups, the content they publish is not always overtly propagandistic. While their affiliations generally shape the narratives they adopt, some of them strive to avoid subjectivity in their messaging. One of the most popular vloggers is Teo Lupu, who in the past was a member of the Liberal Party and the Pro Moldova Party (*Partidul Pro Moldova*), both advocating, among other things, for integration with the European Union. Lupu leans toward pro-Western values, and his criticism of the government and state institutions often focuses on the need for democratic reforms. Another notable figure is Natalia Morari, an investigative journalist known for promoting media freedom and addressing issues such as corruption, abuse of power, and social problems. She is active on Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and Telegram. In 2018–2019 she served as ambassador of the “*Stop False!*” campaign organized by the Independent Press Association, aimed at combating disinformation and manipulation in the media. In 2024 she ran as an independent candidate in the presidential election, but she performed poorly in public debates. Her reputation was also damaged by her connections with Veaceslav Platon, who was accused of participating in the embezzlement of about \$1 billion from Moldova’s banking system between 2012 and 2014, which triggered a severe financial crisis in the country. Platon was also allegedly the architect of a money laundering scheme known as the “*Russian Laundromat*”, through which between \$20 and \$80 billion was funneled out of Russia via a network of banks, mainly in Moldova and Latvia, between 2010 and 2014. When Morari was asked during an election debate on *Jurnal TV* about possible influence from the controversial businessman on her campaign, she responded by accusing the station of having accepted €15,000 a month from Platon between 2016 and 2019. Although the moderator called the allegation a “big lie,” Platon confirmed it, claiming that he had supported *Jurnal TV* selflessly in order to prevent the closure of one of the last opposition TV stations.

In March 2024, Dorin Galben, another well-known public figure in Moldova, published an interview with Platon on his YouTube channel. The interview drew criticism from the journalistic community and led to the termination of Galben's cooperation with *TV8*. Galben is seen as supportive of democratic values and a pro-Western orientation, but he criticizes both the Moldovan government and the opposition. He has frequently criticized the activities of Igor Dodon and the Socialist Party. Although not directly affiliated with any group, he collaborates with NGOs promoting freedom of speech in the region and participates in initiatives of the *Organizația pentru Dezvoltarea Antreprenoriatului* (Organization for the Development of Entrepreneurship), a Moldovan public institution under the Ministry of Economy that supports local entrepreneurship. Journalist Ilinca Avram, known for her work with the public broadcaster *TeleRadio-Moldova*, is also not directly affiliated with any political parties or interest groups. The content she posts on digital platforms, including Instagram, is considered neutral and usually focuses on civic and educational issues.

On Facebook, popular content is also published by Gheorghe Gonța, a Moldovan journalist who conducts interviews online in a direct and provocative manner. Although Gonța's style may suggest journalistic independence, his choice of interviewees and professional experience with *Accent TV* and *NTV Moldova* – both retransmitting Russian content – have led to accusations of pro-Russian political leanings. The media outlets he worked with lost their broadcasting licenses due to spreading Russian disinformation. Currently, however, there are no clear formal links between Gonța and pro-Russian groups.

Valeriu Ostalep, former Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Moldova (2006–2009), has also ended his strictly political activity. He now appears as a political analyst and commentator, sharing his views via Telegram and YouTube. Although Ostalep is accused of sympathizing with Russia, he tries to present his analyses as being based on Moldova's national interests. Evaluations of his work thus depend on the political and ideological perspective of his audience.

A more explicit political orientation can be attributed to Veaceslav Valico, associated with the "*Pentru Popor*" ("For the People") movement. Both the movement and Valico's public activity are aimed at mobilizing society against the government's pro-Western policies. Valico sympathizes with the Șor Party and is a well-known opposition voice against reforms advancing Moldova's

integration with the European Union. On TikTok, Valico has gathered more than 91,000 followers. Similar views are expressed by Gabriel Călin, a Moldovan blogger and online creator with over 75,000 TikTok followers, known for collaborating with pro-Russian media.

The religious online creator Vladimir Năstase is also popular among internet users, and – unlike the stance generally taken by other Moldovan clergy and religious leaders – he does not shy away from criticizing certain aspects of contemporary politics. His messaging often contains pro-Western narratives and opposition to Russian influence in Moldova, though this is not the main focus of his activity. Năstase primarily seeks to support initiatives against corruption, improve living conditions, and mobilize citizens for civic engagement.

Among younger audiences, the creator Kelin (Келин) is popular. He runs accounts on Telegram and YouTube. Although he mainly publishes entertainment content, he occasionally addresses topics related to Moldova's relations with Russia.

iv. Foreign

Among foreign non-traditional media operating in Moldova's information space, Russian actors stand out for their popularity. One example is Alexander Hakimov, a Russian influencer who promotes content related to spiritual development. While Hakimov does not directly address political issues, he promotes traditional conservative ideas that align with pro-Russian discourse. He emphasizes community, tradition, and spiritual renewal in harmony with Orthodox values and Eastern culture. Other Russian online creators with large followings include Konstantin Semin, as well as YouTube channels such as *Political Russia* (Политическая Россия). Pro-Russian content on YouTube was also disseminated by Anatoliy Shariy, a Ukrainian investigative journalist and politician known for his reporting on organized crime in Ukraine between 2008 and 2011. Shariy is notorious for criticizing Ukrainian mass media as well as the Ukrainian authorities. His YouTube channel was blocked in 2022, but before that it had nearly 3 million subscribers – an unusually high number for politically oriented content on the platform.

Pro-Russian messaging intensified in 2020, when Moldovans elected a pro-European president and government. In 2024, these activities escalated again in the context of the presidential election and the referendum on European integration. Moldova's acquisition of EU candidate status two years

earlier, combined with attempts to build societal resilience to disinformation, provided the Kremlin with motivation to sharpen its attacks. According to research by *Watchdog.md*, the narrative that “EU integration will drag Moldova into the war [in Ukraine]” accounted for 10% of all hostile narratives identified in Moldova’s information space during the first weeks of May 2024. Content disseminated by Kremlin influence agents in Moldova is amplified by Maria Zakharova, spokesperson for the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The main goal is to stoke distrust, fear, and anxiety in Moldovan society by creating the impression that the pro-Western authorities are pushing the country toward war. These voices are reinforced by statements from former president Igor Dodon, Ilan Șor, and pro-Russian bloggers who spread their narratives through social media.

v. Cyclical Events and Nationwide as well as Regional Initiatives

A significant impact on public debate and the development of the media sector comes from the annual *Forumul Mass-Media* (Media Forum), which serves as a platform for discussions on press freedom, journalistic ethics, media financing, technological challenges, and combating disinformation. The forum brings together journalists, experts, academia, and civil society organizations, creating space for collaboration among media outlets from different regions of the country. Other opportunities to promote media independence include the celebration of World Press Freedom Day (*Ziua Libertății Presei*) and International Human Rights Day (*Ziua Internațională a Drepturilor Omului*). In Moldova, both events are marked by debates highlighting restrictions on access to information and the risks faced by Moldovan journalists. Outstanding journalistic achievements – such as work promoting democratic values, investigative reporting, or media innovations – are rewarded at the annual *Gala Press Club* (*Clubul de Presă*). Media consumers’ competencies are the focus of Media Literacy Week (*Săptămâna Educației Mediatică*), organized in cooperation with international organizations and local media. The event aims to raise awareness about disinformation and promote critical thinking skills. Another important event for the development of information and communication technologies is the Moldova ICT Summit, a recurring conference dedicated to the impact of new technologies and digitalization on the media sector and access to information.

In strongly pro-Russian regions such as Gagauzia and Transnistria, conferences and forums are also organized on the challenges faced by regional “media” – such as their relations with authorities, financing, and problems with so-called “disinformation.” While these events often appear to promote media independence from government control, in practice their agenda reflects narratives supportive of Russia’s interests. The role of media in shaping national identity is also emphasized during regional cultural events, such as Russian Culture Days in Transnistria or the Gagauz Halkı Cultural Festival. The Russian Culture Days, organized in the Russia-backed separatist region of Transnistria, go beyond cultural dimensions and pose a series of political, social, and security threats to Moldova. While officially promoting culture, these events are used as tools of influence and political pressure in the region. They serve to popularize pro-Russian ideas, weakening Moldova’s aspirations for integration with the European Union and the West. Such events reinforce the image of Transnistria as a separate “political entity,” undermining Moldova’s territorial integrity. They are often used as a pretext to intensify Russian activities in Transnistria, such as strengthening military forces or conducting intelligence operations, including active measures.

The aforementioned Cultural Festival *Gagauz Halkı* (which in the Gagauz language means *People of the Gagauz*) is an annual cultural event organized in Gagauzia, an autonomous region of Moldova, aimed at celebrating the culture, traditions, and heritage of the Gagauz – a Turkic ethnic minority inhabiting this region.

c) Non-Governmental and Other Non-State Organizations Influencing Public Opinion

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are entities operating independently of state structures that significantly influence public opinion by carrying out a wide range of social, humanitarian, cultural, environmental, educational, political, and human rights-related activities. Foundations are important actors in the social and political sphere, shaping public opinion through educational programs, charitable initiatives, social campaigns, as well as by supporting research and civic initiatives. Their influence stems from their ability to raise public awareness, change attitudes, and promote specific values.

According to the State Register of Legal Entities, in May 2023 there were 15,780 non-commercial organizations registered in Moldova, of which only 2,000 to 4,000 (13–25%) were active. In recent years, a decline in the number of newly registered organizations has also been observed. **Despite efforts to promote civic engagement, progress is considered too modest to create a dynamic, sustainable, and resilient civil society.** Persistent challenges include limited financial support from national institutions and low public awareness regarding the role of NGOs. **As a result, NGOs have only a limited impact on shaping Moldovan public opinion.** Many of them still rely heavily on external support, particularly from international donors such as the Soros Foundation, the European Union, and development agencies like USAID (United States Agency for International Development) or UNDP (United Nations Development Programme). However, some organizations directly involved in Russian influence operations also play a role, most notably the Russkiy Mir Foundation, which promotes Russian cultural, linguistic, and political influence.

The Russkiy Mir Foundation was established in 2007 at the initiative of Russian President Vladimir Putin, ostensibly to promote the Russian language, culture, and values worldwide. It is one of the key instruments of Russia’s “soft power,” used to strengthen its international influence – particularly in former Soviet republics and among the Russian diaspora. The foundation has been used to disseminate pro-Russian narratives and disinformation aimed at reinforcing Russia’s position while undermining Western values.

NGOs in Moldova are frequently subject to criticism for allegedly acting in the interests of external actors, which undermines public trust in the third sector and is exploited by Russian propaganda to discredit pro-Western organizations. According to the Public Opinion Barometer (2022), nearly 24% of Moldovans expressed high or moderate trust in civil society organizations. Although this percentage has been increasing in recent years, it still remains relatively low.

An example of initiatives supporting civic media in Moldova is the “Civic Media” project, created by the international organization *Internews*. The project encourages local communities to produce informational content. Among those engaged in its implementation is Moldova Curată, a pro-Western information platform whose initiatives are often funded by the Soros Foundation.

d) Economic Entities with the Potential to Influence the Shape and Accessibility of Content

Economic entities such as corporations, state-owned enterprises, business foundations, or trade organizations play a key role in influence operations. They are used to pursue political, economic, cultural, and geopolitical objectives. Their actions may be overt or covert and often combine economic interests with the strategic goals of a state or influence groups.

Gazprom and Rudnap Group: Through their impact on Moldova's energy sector and economic policy, both Gazprom and Rudnap Group can indirectly influence informational content, particularly within pro-Russian media. Media coverage of economic issues is also shaped by companies such as the Trans-Oil Group, a leading grain and oil exporter in Moldova, and the oil company Rompetrol.

Sheriff Group: In separatist Transnistria, one of the largest companies is the Sheriff Group, founded in the 1990s by former KGB officers. Its economic and political influence is immense, with business activities including the Sheriff supermarket chain, the region's most important football club Sheriff Tiraspol, and the monopolistic telecommunications operator Sheriff Telecom. The company controls most of the fuel market in the region, manages alcohol and tobacco production facilities, and owns banks and financial institutions. It also owns and controls local media in Transnistria, giving it direct power over the information space. The media owned by Sheriff Group, such as television and the press, promote pro-Russian narratives and undermine Moldovan territorial integrity. **To support its pro-Russian policy, Sheriff Group uses, among others, the newspaper *Slovo Naddniestra*, the online portal *Dniester*, Tiraspol radio and television, as well as the TSV television channel.** Sheriff Group is not only an economic monopolist in Transnistria but also a key tool in Russian influence operations. By controlling essential sectors of the economy, media, and social events, the group reinforces pro-Russian narratives, destabilizes Moldova, and serves the Kremlin's strategic interests in the region.

Moldova Agroindbank (MAIB): Between 2013 and 2015, more than \$13 million from a Russian money-laundering scheme known as the "*Russian Laundromat*" was invested in shares of Moldova Agroindbank, the country's largest commercial bank. The scheme involved transferring illicit funds from Russia through a network of shell companies and bank accounts, using fictitious loans

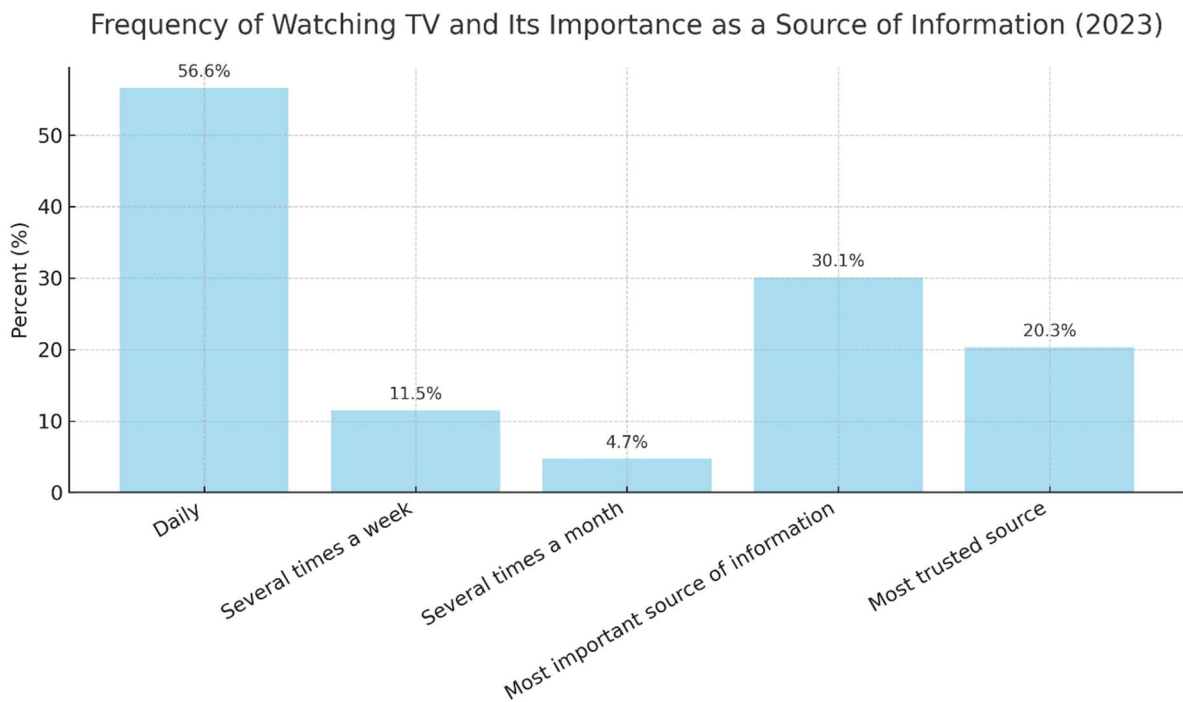
and court rulings. The aim was to conceal the true origin of the money and reintroduce it into the legal financial system. As a result, illicit funds were used to gain control over Moldovan financial institutions, which negatively affected the country's economic stability. Following the scandal, in October 2018, a consortium led by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) acquired a 41% stake in MAIB for €23 million. The consortium also included the Lithuanian firm Invalda and Horizon Capital, an investment fund active in Ukraine and Moldova. The purpose of the transaction was to restore confidence in Moldova's banking sector.

2. Information Habits of Society

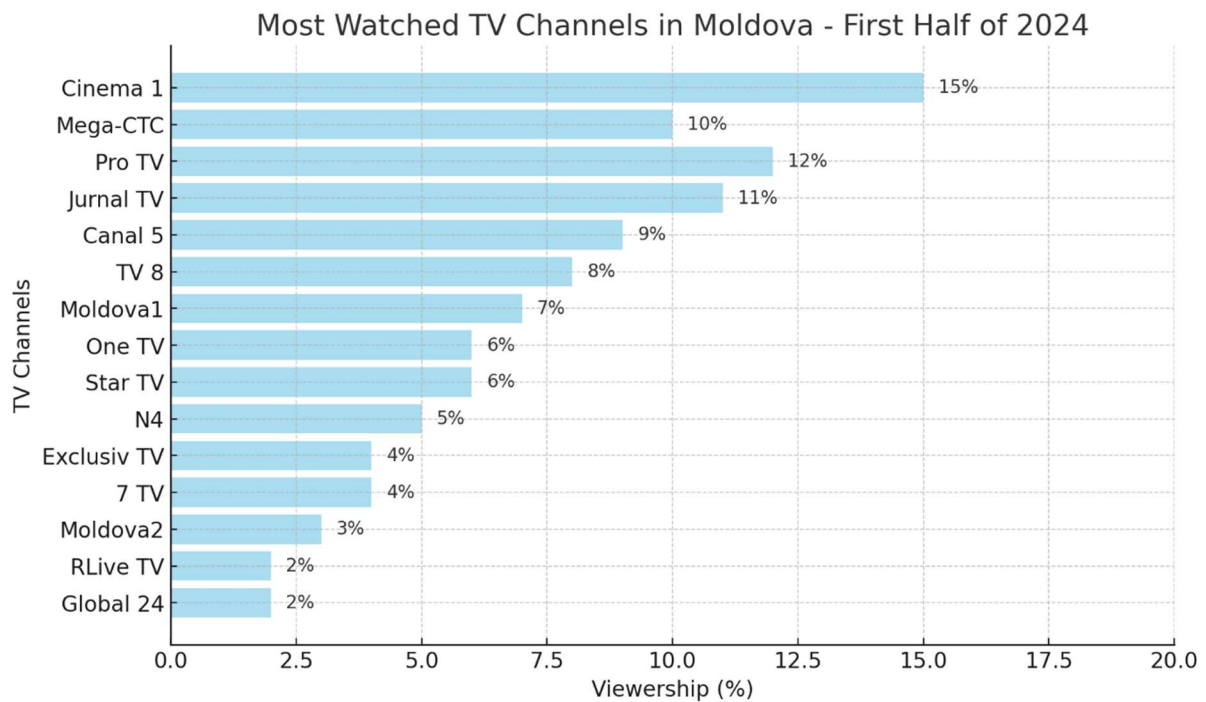
The information habits of society are patterns of behavior, preferences, and practices related to the acquisition, processing, and use of information by individuals and social groups. They reflect the way people gain knowledge about the world, communicate, and make decisions in personal, social, and professional contexts.

a) Viewership and Perception of Traditional Media

In 2023, 56.6% of Moldovans declared that they watch television daily, 11.5% several times a week, and 4.7% several times a month. According to data from the *Public Opinion Barometer*, 30.1% of respondents consider television to be the most important source of information. For 20.3% of respondents, television is also the source of information they trust the most.

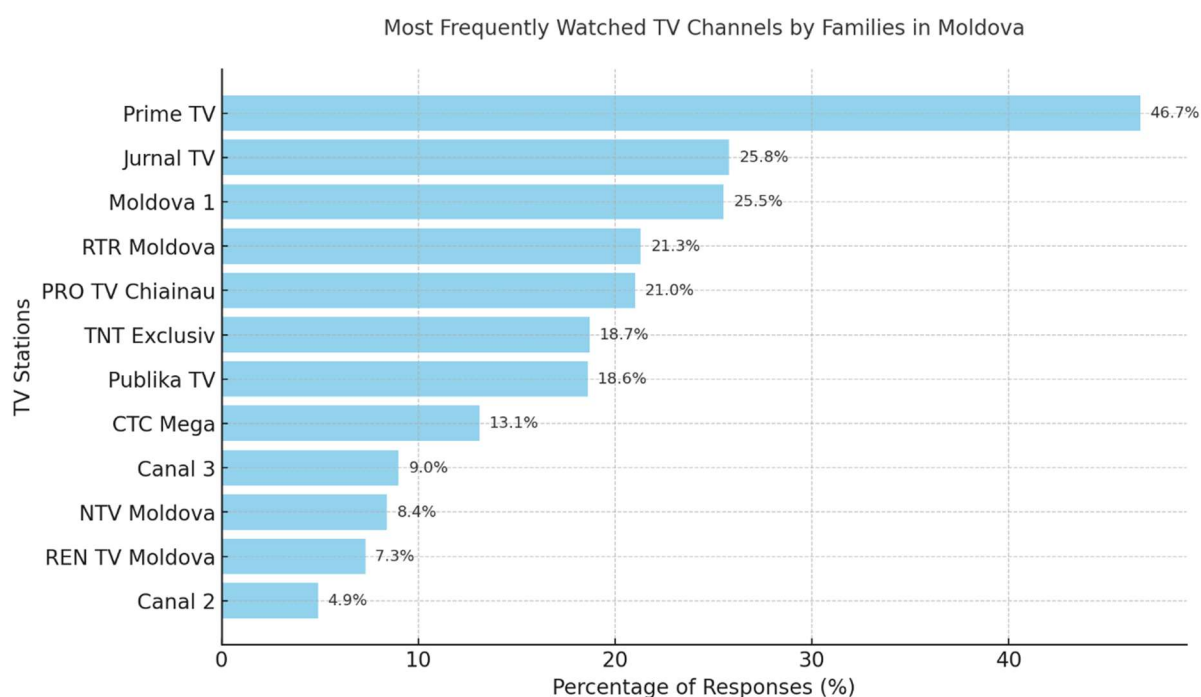


In the first half of 2024, the most-watched TV stations in Moldova were: Cinema 1, Mega-CTC (license suspended), Pro TV, Jurnal TV, Canal 5 (license suspended), TV8, Moldova 1 (state television), One TV, Star TV, N4, Exclusiv TV, 7 TV, Moldova 2 (state television), RLive TV and Global 24.



The suspension of broadcasting licenses therefore did not completely eliminate access to pro-Russian broadcasters, although in some cases it significantly limited it. In practice, viewers have the technical possibility to bypass imposed restrictions through VPNs or proxy servers. In addition, some stations that lost their licenses migrated into the structures of others. The scale of Moscow's influence on shaping public opinion in Moldovan society is clearly reflected in viewership statistics from before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In 2017, when the Independent Journalism Center asked 1,200 Moldovans over the age of 15 to name three stations their family watches, the most frequently mentioned were: Prime TV (46.7%), Jurnal TV (25.8%), Moldova 1 (25.5%). Other stations followed: RTR Moldova (21.3%), PRO TV Chişinău (21%), TNT Exclusiv (18.7%), Publika TV (18.6%), CTC Mega (13.1%), Canal 3 (9%), NTV Moldova (8.4%), REN TV Moldova (7.3%), Canal 2 (4.9%).

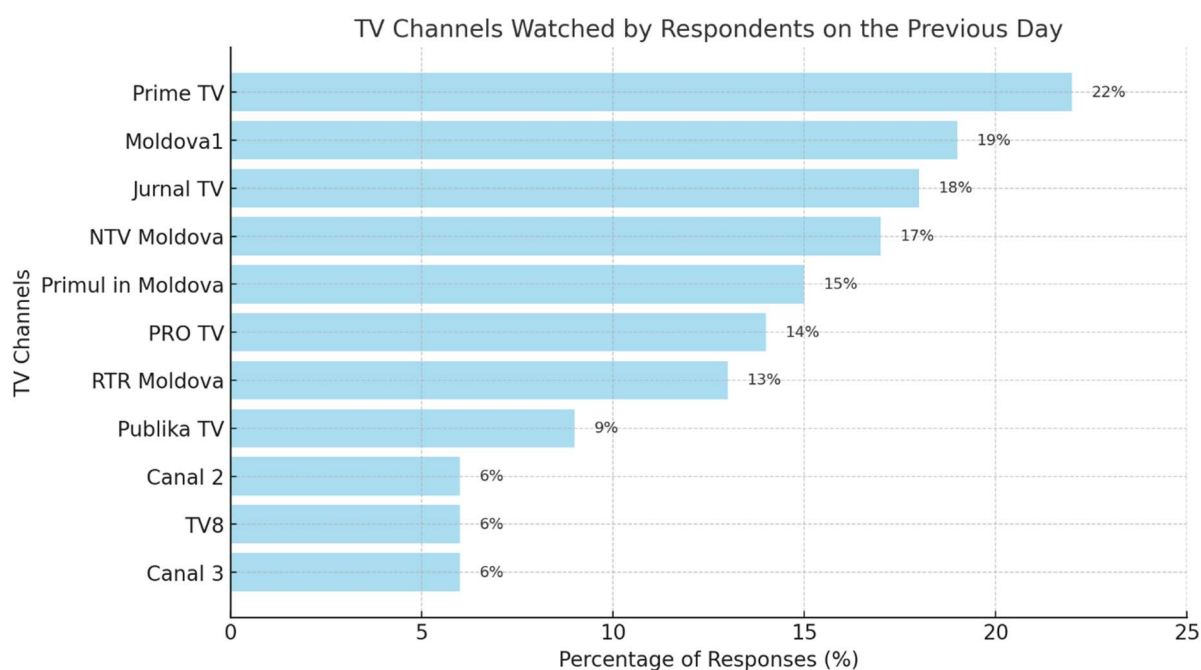
Study of the Information Environment: MOLDOVA



It should be noted that the majority of the stations included in this ranking (Prime TV, RTR Moldova, Publika TV, CTC Mega, Canal 3, NTV Moldova, and Canal 2) lost their broadcasting licenses due to spreading Kremlin propaganda. This illustrates how great an impact the Russian Federation had on the perception of events within Moldovan society.

Data from Statista Research Department (2021) prove that this influence was a constant element of the Moldovan media landscape. When 1,341 respondents aged 18+ were asked which channel they had watched the previous day, the results were similar and the long-time leaders maintained their high positions: Prime TV (22%), Moldova 1 (19%), Jurnal TV (18%). Other channels followed: NTV Moldova (17%), Primul in Moldova (15%), PRO TV (14%), RTR Moldova (13%), Publika TV (9%), Canal 2 (6%), TV8 (6%), Canal 3 (5%).

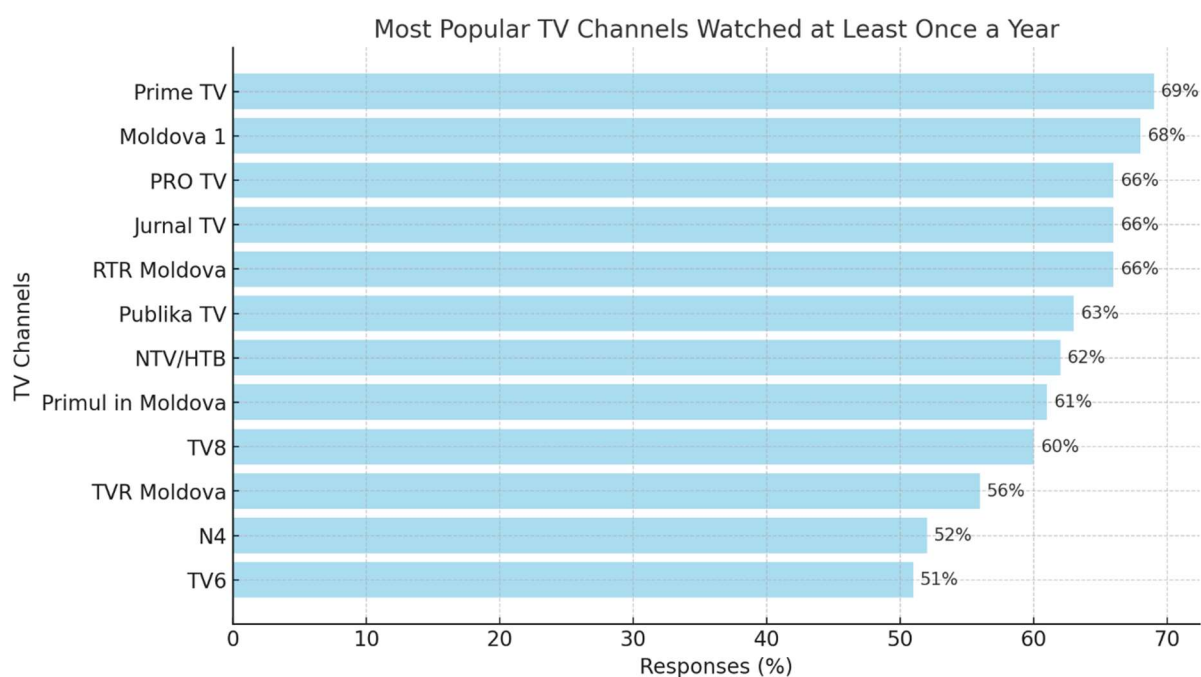
Study of the Information Environment: MOLDOVA



Once again, the ranking therefore included seven TV stations whose licenses were revoked or suspended in 2022–2023 (*Prime TV*, *NTV Moldova*, *Primul in Moldova*, *RTR Moldova*, *Publika TV*, *Canal 2*, *Canal 3*).

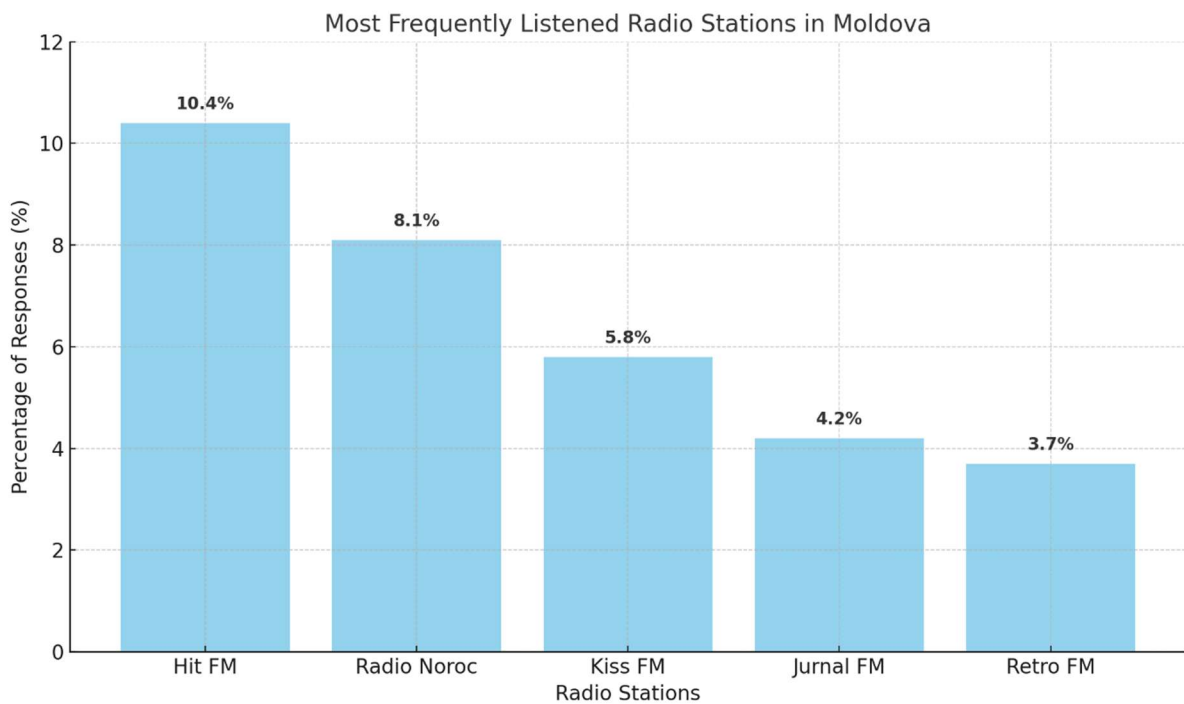
In 2022 – just before the process of revoking or suspending licenses began – the Center for Sustainable Peace and Democratic Development (SeeD), sponsored by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), collected data from 2,336 respondents, identifying the most popular stations (watched at least once a year). Respondents listed: Prime TV (69%), Moldova 1 (68%), PRO TV (66%), Jurnal TV (66%), RTR Moldova (66%), Publika TV (63%), NTV/HTB (62%), Primul in Moldova (61%), TV8 (60%), TVR Moldova (56%), N4 (52%), TV6 (51%). This time, the ranking also included five television stations that enjoyed high viewership despite spreading Russian propaganda.

Study of the Information Environment: MOLDOVA



It is also worth mentioning the research conducted by Magenta Consulting between 2018 and 2022 as part of the Internews in Moldova project, funded by USAID and the British Embassy in Chişinău. Over these years, the channels Moldova 1, Jurnal TV, PRO TV, and TV8 recorded an increase in public trust, in contrast to TV Prime, which was the only one to register a decline (from 32% in 2018 to 21% in 2022).

For 3.8% of Moldovans, the most trusted source of information is radio. This medium is primarily used by people over the age of 45. According to the company Xplane, in the spring of 2024 the most frequently listened-to radio stations in Moldova were: Hit FM (10.4%), Radio Noroc (8.1%), Kiss FM (5.8%), Jurnal FM (4.2%), and Retro FM (3.7%). Only the first of these has a nationwide reach, while the others are regional or local broadcasters. All of them are privately owned stations.



Print press is considered the most trusted source of information for 1.2% of Moldovans – primarily women and urban residents. Almost 4.7% of respondents read newspapers on a daily basis. According to data from the National Bureau of Statistics of Moldova, in 2023 there were 84 newspapers published in the country, though circulation has been steadily declining for the past 15 years. At the same time, the number and circulation of Romanian-language press accounted for about half of all newspapers published. The most frequently subscribed Romanian-language newspaper is *Ziarul de Gardă*, while among Russian-language press the most popular remains *Komsomolskaya Pravda*. A growing trend among publishers is to discontinue print editions and move operations online. A major challenge for print media is the decision of the national postal operator to raise newspaper distribution rates by 341% starting in 2024. Coping with this increase may require continuous support from the Moldovan government.

The information habits of a society are largely shaped by the available media infrastructure, which forms the foundation of access to knowledge and information. This rule is particularly evident in regions with limited media pluralism. In Transnistria, the media environment is dominated by strong Russian influence, fostering consumption of content aligned with pro-Russian narratives. A key example is the TSV television station, one of the main news channels in the region, owned by the Sheriff Group, a conglomerate established by former KGB officers and active

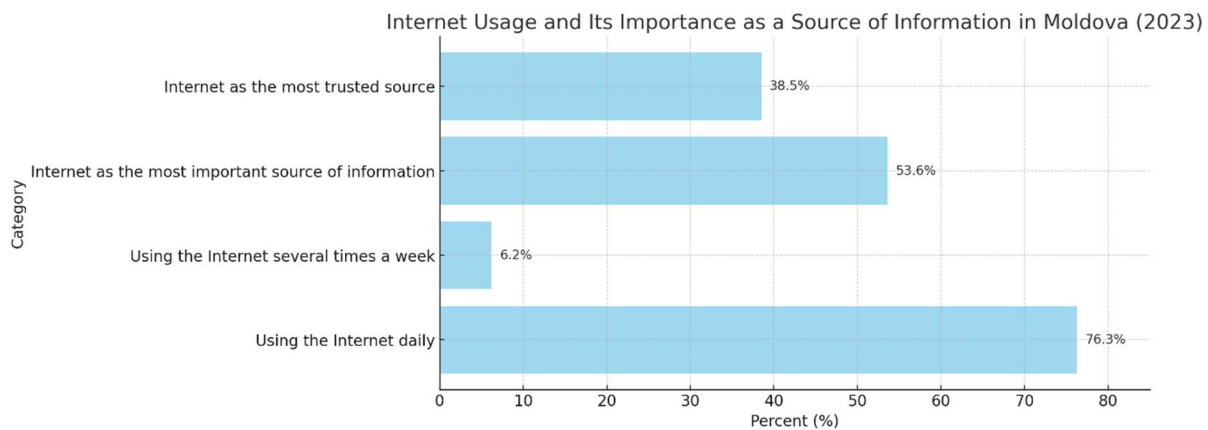
in multiple sectors. Sheriff Group controls, among others, a network of gas stations, supermarkets, a construction company, and the most successful football club in Transnistria – FC Sheriff Tiraspol. The group also owns the aforementioned TV channel and the publishing house *Novosti Pridnestrovyya* (“News of Transnistria”), one of the main publishing outlets in the region. It is responsible for publishing the daily *Pridnestrovskiy Rabochiy* (“Worker of Transnistria”), which supports pro-Russian narratives, promotes the political and economic interests of the Sheriff Group, as well as the local authorities in Transnistria. Another tool of Russian soft power in the region is RTR Transnistria, a branch of the Russian RTR (Rossiya 2) channel. Such a media environment not only shapes how audiences perceive reality but also limits diversity of perspectives, reinforcing the constructed worldview and strengthening promoted values.

It is worth noting that when the Thomas Reuters Foundation asked Moldovans to provide examples of “high-quality journalism,” most respondents cited personalities exclusively from traditional media – hosts of political talk shows and news presenters. Investigative journalism was also mentioned as a source that allows the public to gain fuller insights into public figures. Television political talk shows were likewise highlighted in the context of obtaining the “latest news.”

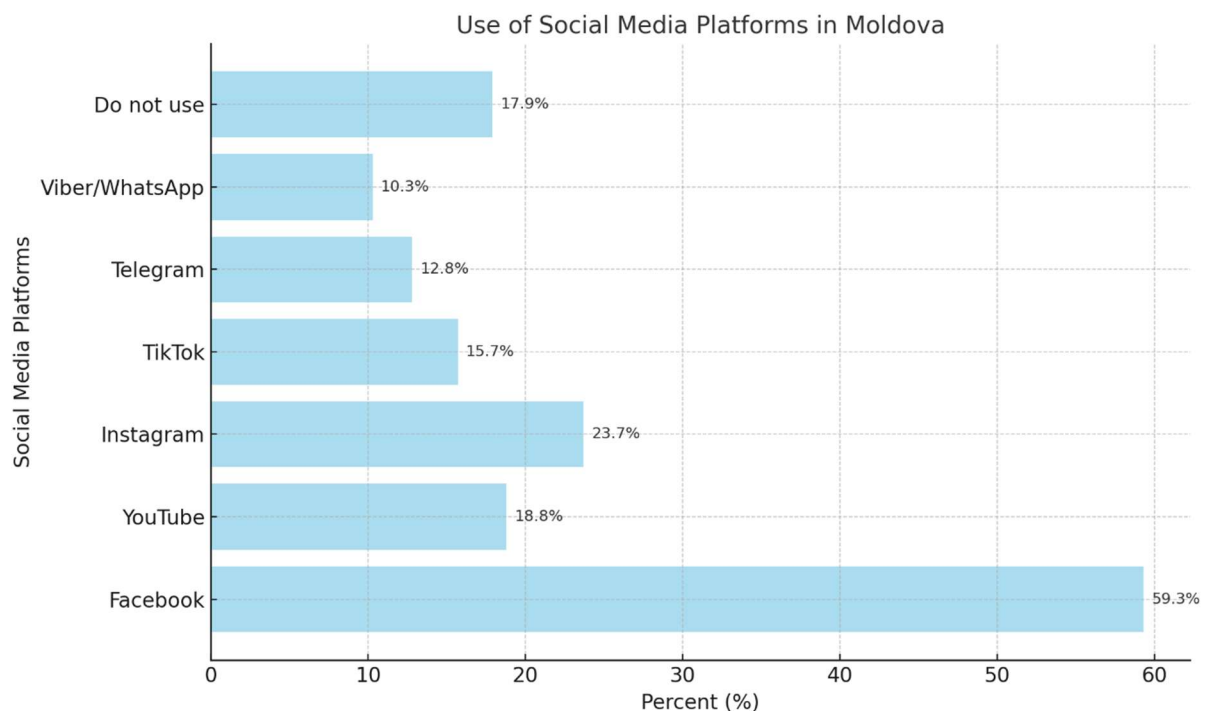
b) Popularity of online sources, including unverified ones

In 2023, 76.3% of Moldovans declared that they used the Internet daily, while 6.2% accessed it several times a week. According to the Public Opinion Barometer, the Internet was identified as the most important source of information by 53.6% of respondents. At the same time, 38.5% of those surveyed considered it the most trusted source of information. In both cases, the Internet significantly outperformed television.

Study of the Information Environment: MOLDOVA

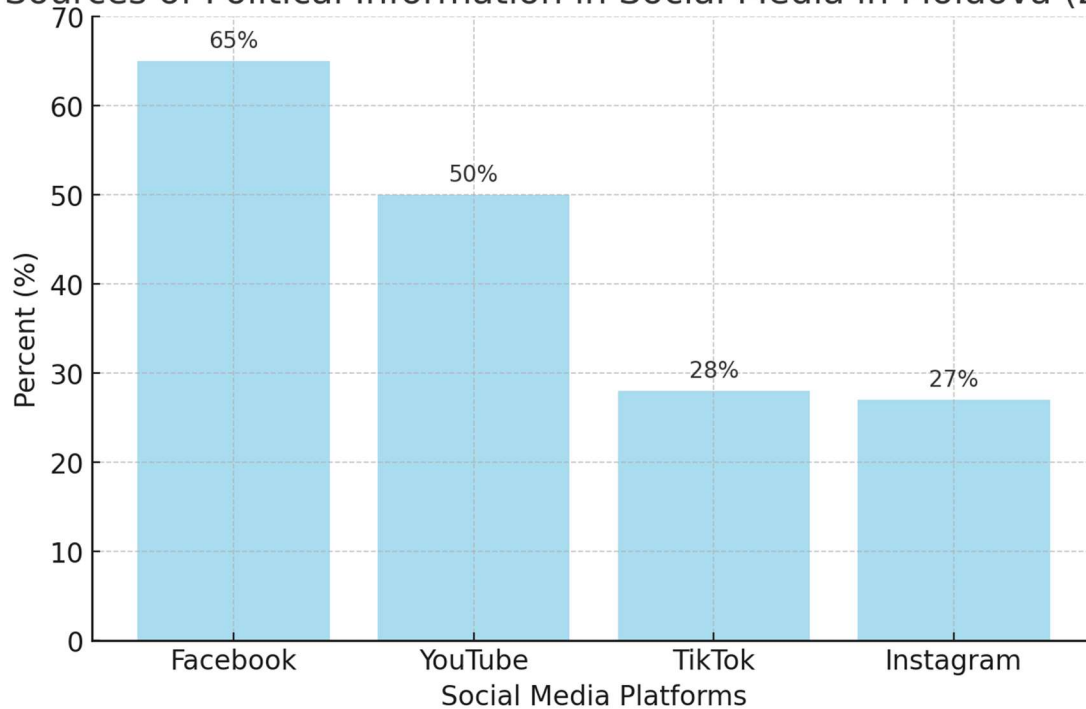


Among social media platforms, the most popular are Facebook (59.1%), YouTube (34.5%), and Instagram (31.6%). Facebook is also the platform most widely used across all demographic groups. When Moldovans were asked on behalf of WatchDog which social platforms they used daily or several times a week, the results showed that 59.3% preferred Facebook, 23.7% Instagram, and 18.8% YouTube. TikTok was favored by 15.7%, while 12.8% used Telegram. In addition, 10.3% of respondents reported regular use of messaging apps such as Viber or WhatsApp. Users especially valued the ability to read comments and reactions of others. Notably, 17.9% of Moldovans stated that they do not use social networks at all.



Research by the International Republican Institute shows that in 2024, 46% of Moldovans received their first or second piece of political information directly from social media. Meanwhile, 65% drew information from Facebook, 50% from YouTube, 28% from TikTok, and 27% from Instagram. The latter two platforms, as well as Telegram, were primarily accessed by the younger generation (up to 25 years old).

Sources of Political Information in Social Media in Moldova (2024)



Telegram became the subject of particular controversy when the Moldovan authorities attempted to block accounts and chatbots linked to fugitive oligarch Ilan Șor. These efforts intensified ahead of the October 2024 presidential elections and referendum. The Moldovan National Investigation Inspectorate (INI) requested the closure of these channels, aiming to prevent interference in the vote. The request also called on Telegram to provide information on chatbot administrators, the IP addresses used to create and manage them, as well as the phone numbers of individuals involved in the campaign. The stated goal was to expose “illegal financing of political parties and initiative groups” as well as “money laundering conducted by an organized criminal group.” As a result, Telegram channels belonging to Șor and other pro-Russian propagandists were removed, including those of Marina Tauber, Alexandr Nesterovschi, Vasile Bolea, and the Governor of Gagauzia, Evghenia Guțul.

- **Marina Tauber** joined the Șor Party in 2016, quickly rising to the position of vice-chairperson. The party is considered pro-Russian and was involved in organizing protests against the pro-European government of Maia Sandu. Tauber has been accused of illegal party financing and falsifying financial reports. She was repeatedly detained and placed under house arrest. In May 2023, she was sanctioned by the European Union for destabilizing the Republic of Moldova and for her ties to the Russian government. In February 2024, the U.S. Department of the Treasury imposed sanctions on her for attempting to undermine Moldova's electoral processes in favor of the Kremlin.
- **Alexandr Nesterovschi** (b. January 11, 1981, in Răuțel, Moldavian SSR) is a Moldovan politician serving as a member of the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova. In September 2023, he was stripped of parliamentary immunity and arrested on charges of large-scale passive corruption and preparations for illegal financing of political parties.
- **Vasile Bolea** (b. October 27, 1982, in Moscow) is a Moldovan politician, lawyer, and former rugby player. Since 2014, he has served as a deputy in the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova. In November 2024, the National Integrity Authority (ANI) identified an unjustified discrepancy in his assets amounting to 231,000 lei. Bolea is widely known for his numerous ties to Russia and his involvement in pro-Russian political initiatives in Moldova. He has repeatedly voiced positions aligned with Russian narratives, suggesting that Moldova should remain within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and refusing to recognize Russia as an aggressor in the context of the war in Ukraine. Bolea has participated in events organized in Russia and in official meetings, signaling his commitment to initiatives promoting the Kremlin's policies. During his electoral campaign, he criticized the values promoted by the European Union, emphasizing traditional pro-Russian values instead.

The Victory political bloc's Telegram channel, launched in Moscow by Ilan Șor in April 2024 and comprising several parties controlled by the oligarch, was also shut down. The same action was taken against TV6 and MD24 channels. In response to the blocking, Șor declared that he would "open countless Telegram accounts despite the actions of the Moldovan authorities."

Since Ilan Șor, Marina Tauber, and Evghenia Guțul are all listed under U.S. and EU sanctions, in June 2024 META additionally closed several of their affiliated Facebook and Instagram accounts, classifying them as “dangerous.”

The most popular search engine in Moldova is Google (used by more than 90% of Internet users), which is often employed for exploring “niche topics.” Other search engines include Yandex.ru, Mail.ru, Yahoo!, Bing, and DuckDuckGo. Among web browsers, Chrome dominates with over 70% usage, followed by Safari, Firefox, Android, Opera, and Samsung Internet.

Since February 2012, the Gemius Research Agency and the Bureau for Audit of Circulation and Internet (BATI) have been measuring the popularity of websites in Moldova, covering the most visited pages by 84% of Internet users over the age of 15. As of September 2024, the most frequently visited news portals were: noi.md, stiri.md, point.md, newsmaker.md, unimedia.info, tv8.md, esp.md, protv.md, zdg.md, diez.md, and agora.md. Among websites not included in the survey, popular ones include jurnal.md, realitatea.md, and md.kp.media. In Gagauzia, however, local portals such as nokta.md, gagauzinfo.md, and gagauznews.com have stronger influence on Internet users.

The portals point.md and stiri.md are both owned by Simpals LLC. The first was created to target Russian-speaking Moldovans, while the second caters to Romanian-speaking citizens. Simpals LLC specializes in online services and is also the largest animation studio in Moldova. The company maintains business ties with Russian firms. The majority of shares belong to Dmitry Volosin, a Ukrainian immigrant residing in Moldova, while a minority stake is held by Roman Stirbu.

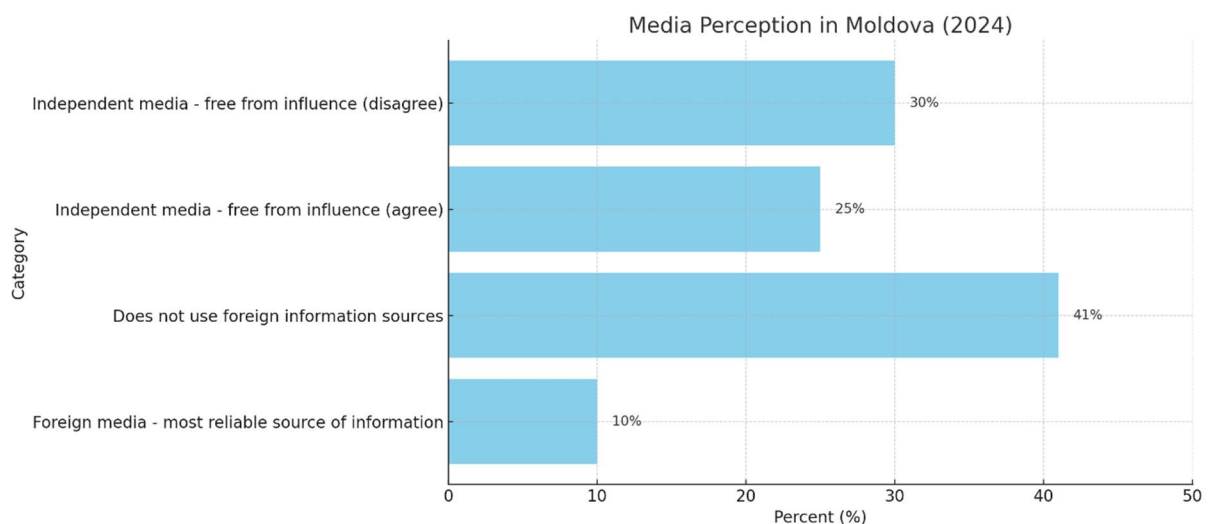
By contrast, protv.md belongs to Central European Media Enterprises, which was acquired in 2019 by the PPF Group, owned by Czech billionaire Petr Kellner. After Kellner’s death in 2021, full ownership of PPF Group passed to the Kellner family.

The widely popular Moldovan site jurnal.md is owned by Reforma Art LLC, a company belonging to Moldovan businessman Victor Țopa, who fled to Germany after being convicted in Moldova on extortion charges – a case Țopa claims was fabricated by Vlad Plahotniuc. Țopa also owns the highly popular Jurnal TV channel, the well-read newspaper Jurnal de Chișinău, and the radio

station Jurnal FM. As such, he controls a leading television, print, radio, and online media outlet, which limits the diversity of narratives available to Moldovan audiences.

c) Popularity of Foreign Media

According to data from the Thomson Reuters Foundation, for 10% of Moldovans, foreign media represent the most credible source of information. This relatively low figure may, on the one hand, be attributed to the high percentage of people who generally do not use foreign sources of information (41%), particularly among the older population. On the other hand, one in four Moldovan citizens (25%) believes that independent media are those free from the influence of oligarchs, the state, or foreign powers. In contrast, 30% of respondents disagreed with this statement.



It is worth noting that during the Covid-19 pandemic, foreign media proved to be an important source of information for Moldovan citizens. Many of them critically assessed the quality of information delivered through domestic media at the time. At that time, they obtained their information primarily from foreign media such as BBC, The Guardian, Sky News, Le Figaro, or Le Monde, considering their reporting to be reliable.

Among foreign media, television remains the primary source of information for Moldovans. Russian and Romanian outlets have traditionally been the most popular, although the retransmission of pro-Russian content has been partially curtailed following the suspension of broadcasting licenses for channels disseminating disinformation about the war in Ukraine.

For example, in October 2023, Moldova's Council for the Promotion of Projects of National Importance restricted access to Prime TV, until then the country's most-watched channel. Prime TV was part of General Media Group (GMG), officially controlled by a complex network of companies, including foreign entities, but in reality tied to the entourage of oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc. The former leader of the Democratic Party of Moldova, which was accused of siphoning off financial assets through Moldovan banks, was the owner of the GMG holding until his escape from Moldova in 2019. GMG served as his tool of political and propaganda influence. Although the companies belonging to GMG officially came under the control of other entities, including some registered abroad, many analysts regard this move as a mere formality intended to conceal Plahotniuc's actual influence. Although the oligarch declared his support for Moldova's rapprochement with the West and integration with the European Union, as well as engaged in actions against Russian influence (including calling for the withdrawal of Russian troops from Transnistria), Prime TV rebroadcasted content from the Russian channel *Pervyj Kanal*. This pro-Russian instrument of influence was most likely the result of political and economic pragmatism. It allowed him to balance between different centers of influence in order to maintain his position and profits. The pro-European course enabled the oligarch to build relations with the West, while the pro-Russian media allowed him not only to maintain dialogue with Russia but also to preserve influence among pro-Russian voters. Plahotniuc thus retained the ability to shape narratives and moderate content according to his own needs. Considering the popularity of Russian-language media in Moldova, keeping Prime TV as the leader of the television market also provided him with economic benefits.

In December 2022, authorities also restricted the activities of RTR Moldova, which rebroadcast programs from the Russian state channel Rossiya 1. RTR Moldova content subsequently migrated to Cinema 1, owned by Srlavideo-Content, whose proprietor is Irina Stețco. The broadcasting license, however, is held by TV-Comunicatii Grup S.R.L., 25% owned by Valentina Stețco (Irina's mother), 25% by Sb Grup Media SRL, and 50% by the Russian NGO "Rosmediacom". 'Rosmediacom' ('Russian Society for the Organization and Management of Projects in the Field of Mass Information and Mass Communication'). 'Rosmediacom' is owned by three Russian state enterprises: the banks Sberbank and Vneshekonombank, as well as the powerful media company Vedomosti Gosudarstvennogo Telegrafno-Radioveshchannogo Korrespondenta (VGTRK,

in English: All-Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company). This media giant is the main public broadcaster in Russia and controls, among others, the Rossiya 1 channel. **It thus constitutes a central tool of Russian propaganda.**

For many years, NTV Moldova also enjoyed popularity, but access to it was likewise restricted in December 2022. The channel has its counterpart in NTV, formerly controlled by Gazprom-Media, which is owned by the Russian conglomerate Gazprom. NTV still remains part of a larger media structure linked to Russian state interests. NTV Moldova's programming was transferred to EXCLUSIV TV – both stations are owned by the company Exclusiv Media S.R.L., whose director is Ludmila Furculiță, the wife of Corneliu Furculiță, a member of parliament from the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM). Exclusiv Media S.R.L. is also connected with the widely read newspapers in Moldova *Komsomolskaya Pravda* and *Argumenty i Fakty*, which are likewise modeled after their Russian counterparts. **These examples demonstrate that many of Moldova's most influential media outlets remain heavily entangled with Russian interests, with their true centers of control often obscured and located outside Moldova.**

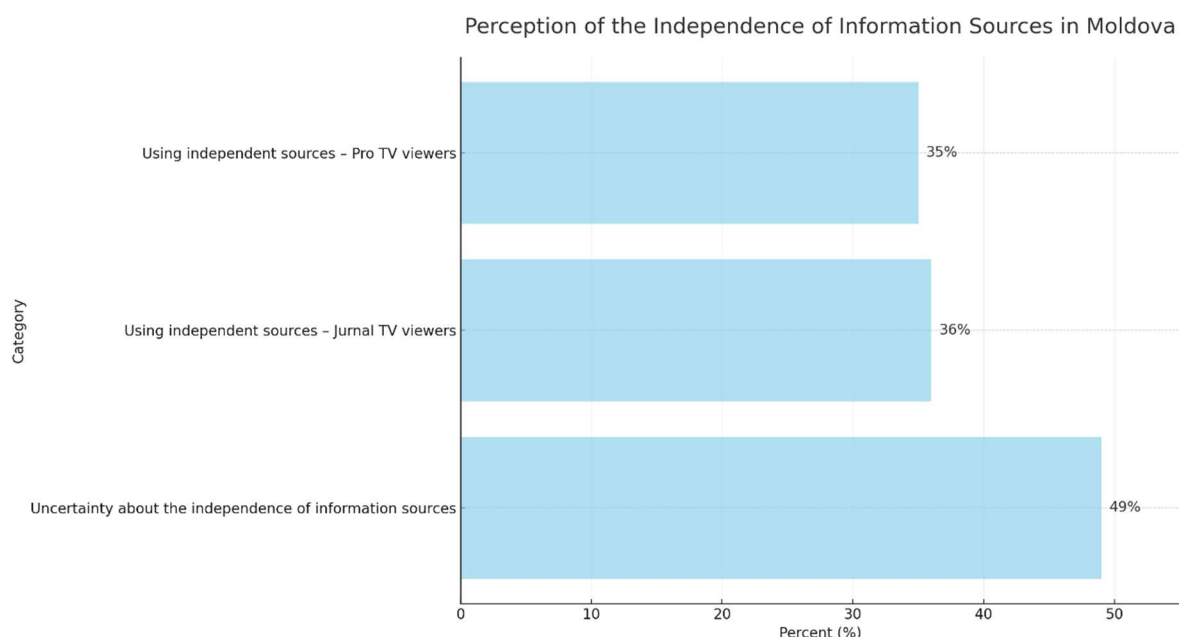
With regard to the printed press, it should at the same time be noted that in 2023 Moldova ranked 28th in the World Press Freedom Index, which demonstrates a significant improvement in media freedom compared to previous years (in 2020, Moldova was ranked 89th). Despite this progress, public trust in the media remains relatively low.

In the radio sector, Hit FM – one of Moldova's most popular stations – also exhibits foreign ties. While officially owned by Jan and Pavel Lozovan, real control is attributed to Dan Lozovan, a business associate of Plahotniuc. Lozovan has been criticized for monopolizing Moldova's media space, with controversies intensifying after structural changes within GMG and the suspension of licenses for stations linked to pro-Russian oligarchs. Accusations of a lack of transparency in media ownership highlight the ongoing problem of media concentration in the hands of a narrow elite.

d) Susceptibility to “Bazaar Information,” Including Conspiracy Theories

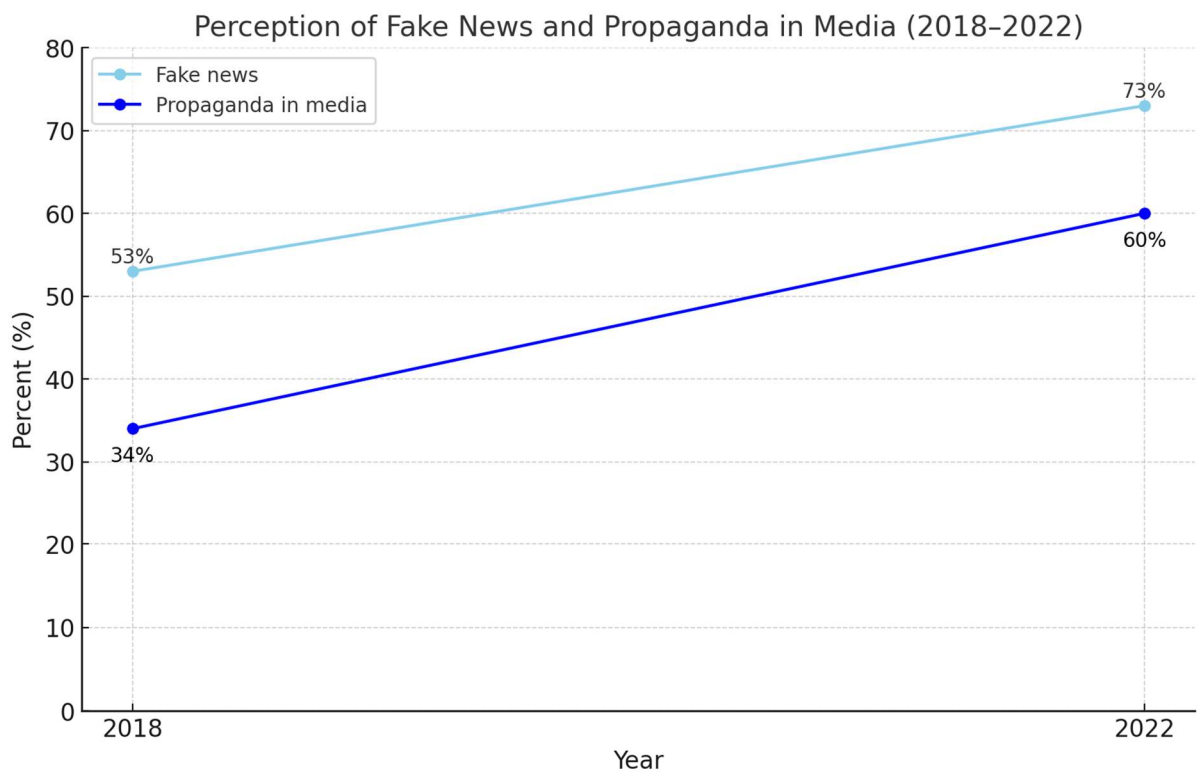
According to data from Magenta Consulting, 49% of Moldovans are uncertain whether the sources they rely on for information are in fact independent. Moreover, one third of respondents who

claim to rely exclusively on independent outlets simultaneously report watching Jurnal TV (36%) and Pro TV (35%). The number of respondents who share the opinion that politics influences the news presented in Moldova is also increasing – in 2020 it was 84%, while in 2022 it was 88% of those surveyed. As a result, news content is widely regarded as politically biased and often produced with the intention of manipulating public opinion.

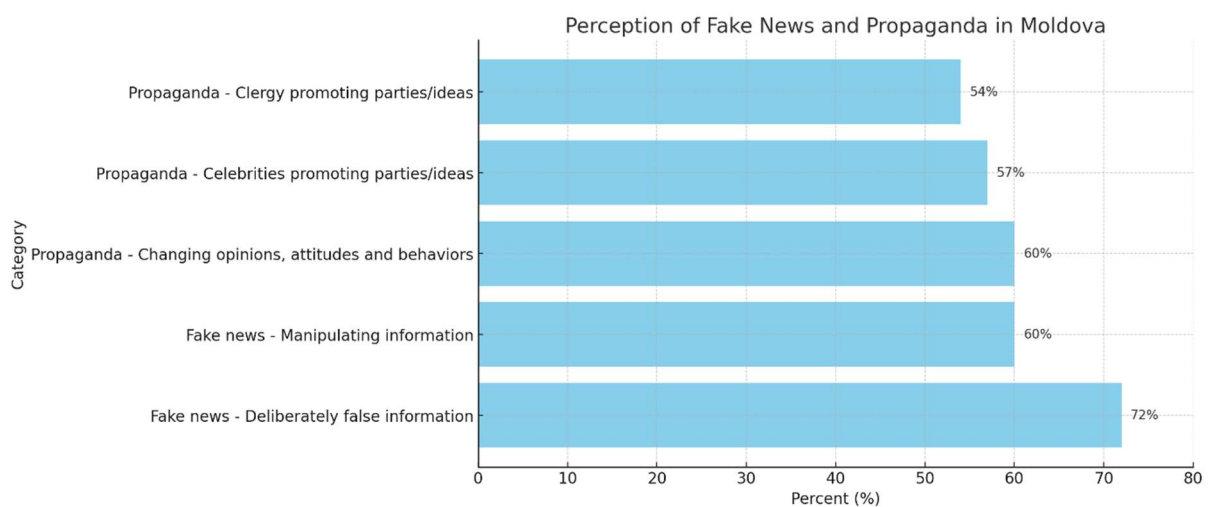


Although 53% of Moldovans believe they can easily distinguish false news from true news, 73% of respondents consider that citizens in general struggle with this distinction. Research by Magenta Consulting on media analysis skills, however, shows that in Moldovan society the tendency to distinguish false news from true news is steadily increasing.

In recent years, the percentage of people declaring familiarity with the terms ‘fake news’ (from 53% in 2018 to 73% in 2022) and ‘propaganda in the media’ (from 34% in 2018 to 60% in 2022) has also risen.



For most Moldovans, “fake news” is defined as deliberately false information presented by journalists as true (72%), or as manipulated reporting aimed at promoting a specific point of view (60%). “Propaganda in the media,” in turn, is understood primarily as political messages aimed at changing views, attitudes, and behaviors (60%), the involvement of celebrities in promoting political parties or ideas (57%), as well as the involvement of clergy in promoting political parties or ideas (54%).



The awareness among Moldovans regarding the possibility of reporting false content is significantly lower. Only 34% of respondents know that it is possible to lodge a complaint when encountering false, offensive, or rights-violating content. Among them, 24% would report it to the police, 20% to the Audiovisual Council of Moldova, while 25% do not know where such a complaint should be submitted.

It is worth noting that, according to data from the Thomas Reuters Foundation, a relatively high percentage of Moldovans (20%) consider the Covid-19 pandemic to be a hoax, which the authors of the report link to the way the threat was presented in the media. Some respondents critically assessed the quality of information provided during the pandemic. Their concerns were mainly raised by the statistics and the belief that certain entities deliberately spread false information for their own financial gain. Among those who perceive the pandemic as a fraud, men and individuals in the 18–35 age group predominate. This opinion is shared twice as often by Moldovans with lower levels of education. Six out of ten adults (60%) reported a change in their behavior as a result of reading news about Covid-19. Among those over the age of 55, this figure reached 73%. Belief in pandemic-related conspiracy theories was even echoed by some local officials, including Ilie Porumbescu and Elena Neaga, the latter with a medical background.

The susceptibility of Moldovans to conspiracy theories and fabricated content is mitigated by the activity of non-governmental organizations. Although only a small percentage of Moldovans trust them and they do not have an above-average influence on shaping public opinion in Moldova at the national level, there are examples of Moldovan NGO activity that have also been recognized internationally. One such success was the campaign against false and biased information, ‘STOP FALS!’, launched in 2015 by the Independent Press Association and partner non-governmental organizations. The initiative’s core tool is the website stopfals.md, launched in 2017 as a platform dedicated to exposing false content, enabling user reporting, and supporting fact-checking. In April 2023, the portal received an award from the Delegation of the European Union in the first edition of the Anti-Disinformation Awards Gala for the best project against disinformation. As part of the campaign, a range of diverse products and informational materials are produced, including the ‘STOP FALS!’ bulletin, films, infographics, and podcasts. The activities are carried out with the support of foreign donors, including FHI 360/USAID, UNICEF, the European Union, the Open Information Partnership, the U.S. Embassy in the Republic of Moldova, the U.S.

Department of State, the British Institute for War & Peace Reporting (IWPR), the Danish International Media Support (IMS), and the U.S. National Democratic Institute.

e) Recognition of Religious Institutions as a Source of Information

The ties of the Orthodox Church in Moldova to Russian politics and its role in the election campaign are the subject of growing controversy. Although Metropolitan Vladimir officially condemns Russia's aggression against Ukraine, his close relations with the Moscow Patriarchate and pro-Russian structures raise doubts about the autonomy of the Moldovan Church. Moldova's Deputy Prime Minister Oleg Serebrian and numerous political and religious experts emphasize that Russia has for years used the Church as an instrument of hybrid warfare in Moldova. This role became particularly evident in the context of the war in Ukraine, when the Russian Orthodox Church was accused of supporting the Russian invasion and legitimizing war crimes. Metropolitan Vladimir, despite publicly condemning Russia's aggression against Ukraine, remains a permanent member of the Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church, which implements the Kremlin's policy in the occupied territories. His declarations of "unity" with the Russian Orthodox Church are read as a sign of loyalty to Moscow, raising questions about his true intentions and his loyalty to the Moldovan nation. The 2024 presidential election and the constitutional referendum on Moldova's accession to the European Union once again highlighted the controversies surrounding the Orthodox Church's involvement in the country's political life. Despite clear provisions in Moldovan law on the Church's political neutrality, numerous instances of campaigning by clergy raise concerns about its growing role in pro-Russian influence operations.

Under Moldovan law, the Church must remain politically neutral, and electioneering by clergy is punishable by a fine. In 2024, in the context of the presidential election and the referendum on European integration, numerous cases of priests' involvement in the campaign were nevertheless recorded. Just after the campaign began, a parish priest from Bălți was filmed by *Nord News* journalists as he spread false content about the European Union during a sermon. In turn, Marchel Mihăescu – the bishop of the Bălți and Făleşti diocese, known for close ties with Moscow – called on clergy in the region to support a pro-Russian candidate. Two weeks before the presidential election and the referendum, Vladimir, Metropolitan of Chișinău and All Moldova, organized a Way of the Cross procession in which politicians also took part, including one of the candidates.

He, meanwhile, called on the ruling party to stop the “moral torture of the Church.” “Law-enforcement officers are coming to the homes of clergy and forcing them to sign various incomprehensible statements. Some priests have been stopped at border crossings and subjected to detailed checks without any grounds. Today the Church is under pressure as in Soviet times. The Church and its servants are receiving more and more requests,” Metropolitan Vladimir declared. At the same time, he expressed concern over the words of Vasile Șoimaru, an MP from the ruling PAS, who stated that – just like Ukraine – Moldova would soon reject the Moldovan Metropolis, which is in reality a Russian metropolis. President Maia Sandu denied this statement. PAS also announced that the MP’s words were his personal opinion and did not reflect the party’s position. “According to the Constitution of Moldova, the Church is separate from the state, it is autonomous, and it does not interfere in political activity,” party representatives said.

Șoimaru’s controversial words were a response to a *deschide.md* report about Moldovan priests affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate who made a pilgrimage to the Russian Federation in the summer of 2024. The results of the journalistic investigation showed that the trips were financed by fugitive oligarch Ilan Șor with the support of the Moscow Patriarchate, and that the purpose of the visits was to obtain “instructions” and funds in exchange for promoting anti-EU and anti-government messages. The Metropolitan of Moldova denied that the pilgrimages had any political basis.

A “key moment” in the media discourse was the appeal Metropolitan Vladimir addressed to Moldovans a week before the aforementioned presidential election and the constitutional referendum on the country’s accession to the European Union. Although the Kremlin was calling for a boycott of the referendum, the cleric urged people to vote “regardless of personal views and political preferences.” It is worth noting in this context that in 2016 Vladimir became the target of fierce criticism after, during the presidential campaign, he referred before the altar to the then pro-Russian candidate Igor Dodon, leader of the Socialist Party, as “Mr. President Dodon,” thereby violating Church rules.

Political controversies are a constant feature of the activity of the Metropolis of Moldova. Unlike political leaders in Chișinău, Metropolitan Vladimir established close contacts with representatives of the pro-Russian separatist regime in Tiraspol, including Igor Smirnov and Vadim Krasnoselsky.

Also deemed controversial was the blessing Vladimir gave to Sava, Archbishop of Tiraspol and Dubăsari, for awarding in 2021 the military priest of the Black Sea Cossack Army, Vadim Trostinsky. This army, a paramilitary organization, was formed on the eve of the war on the Dniester in March 1992 and played a key role in organizing Russian mercenaries to fight against Moldova's independence.

The close relations between Vladimir and the Transnistrian regime were referenced in an open letter from PAN MP Oazu Nantoi in January 2022. Nantoi questioned the loyalty of the Metropolitan of Moldova to the Moldovan nation, wondering whether he was not in fact serving as an "ideological extension of the Russian Orthodox Church." Asked why the cleric had for years tolerated the anti-state activities of Sava, who, incidentally, is also a member of the Synod of the Orthodox Church of Moldova, Vladimir stated that it is "the only institution that enjoys trust, unites, and is present on both banks of the Dniester."

Political themes also accompanied all the visits of the Moscow Patriarch, the Patriarch of All Rus', to Moldova. Patriarch Kirill I paid his first visit in 2011. During a service in the square of the Metropolitan Cathedral he spoke of love for God, which helps to combat the threat of fear, including fear of losing elections. A crowd of two thousand faithful listened to Kirill's sermon, among them then-Prime Minister Vlad Filat, acting President Marian Lupu, and communist leader Vladimir Voronin. After the liturgy, the Patriarch was to lay flowers at the monument to Stephen the Great, but changed his plans after protesters appeared with banners reading: "Stop Russian intervention," "The Republic of Moldova is not a province of Holy Russia," "Comrade Patriarch, religion is not politics." "We oppose the official visit of Patriarch Kirill because we are not subordinate to the Russian Patriarchate. We believe his visit is simply an expression of Russian geopolitics, not of the religious sphere," commented Constantin Codreanu, who learned about the protest from an announcement on a social network. "Metropolitan Kirill has donned a cassock under which he wears KGB epaulettes. I don't want them intervening to solve certain political problems through the Church or our Christian Orthodox faith," said Anatol Matăsaru, leader of the anti-communist "7 April 2009" Movement.

Patriarch Kirill's next visit to Chişinău took place in 2013. This time he also went to Tiraspol, the capital of the separatist pro-Russian Transnistria, where he consecrated a convent. The trip

occurred a few days after Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin warned Moldova over its plan to sign an association agreement with the European Union, suggesting that such an agreement could complicate efforts to resolve the Transnistria issue. During the visit, Kirill emphasized that he was conveying God's message, which "must now be heard very loudly, because the world – especially Western Europe – is losing faith."

In 2018 the Patriarch decorated Igor Dodon with an order for actively supporting the initiatives of the Orthodox Church of Moldova. "You are well aware of the role played by the Church and you support it in your capacity as head of state, and I am grateful to you for that," he said. He was then preparing for a third visit to Moldova, during which – at the suggestion of then-President Igor Dodon – he considered visiting Gagauzia, Transnistria, and the city of Bălți. These plans, however, coincided with rising tensions stemming from the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople's recognition of the autocephaly of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, which caused concern among Orthodox communities in Moldova. Before the recognition of autocephaly, most Orthodox parishes in Ukraine were subordinate to the Russian Orthodox Church, which had strong ties to the Russian authorities. Recognition of the full independence of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church was therefore seen as a step toward greater Ukrainian sovereignty. In light of tensions between religious communities, a potential visit by Kirill I to Moldova was viewed as controversial. The visit was ultimately canceled so as not to escalate local religious-political divisions, as was suggested in Moldovan media discourse at the time. Writing on his Telegram channel "Orthodox Politics," the well-known conservative Orthodox publicist Vsevolod Chaplin (who died in 2020) stated: "Perhaps some of the Moldovan clergy really do not want to see Patriarch Kirill in the country right now. (...) Moreover, Erdogan recently visited Comrat, and some local priests, after meeting with him, may suddenly have decided that they really need a 'Turkish shore' with archon Pasha." He suggested that the "intriguers" could organize protests by "people in robes and almost during services," as well as promote the idea that "all Gagauzians are traitors and there is no point in going to them." Dmitry Pakhomov, director of the international foundation "Christian Solidarity," also spoke of planned public provocations during the potential visit of Kirill I, arguing that their goal would be to create a negative opinion among Moldovans about both the Russian Patriarch and the Russian Orthodox Church. Pakhomov regularly emphasizes the role of traditional spiritual values in building the national identity of Russians. He criticizes attempts to

separate Church and state, viewing liberal ideologies as a threat to Russia's national and cultural unity.

Although decisions on the autocephaly of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine formally came in 2018, the status was finally granted in 2019. A few months later, in May 2019, President Vladimir Putin awarded state honors to prominent figures from Russia and abroad. Among them was Vladimir, Metropolitan of Chişinău and All Moldova, who received the Order of Friendship. "Allow me to thank you for this high state decoration of the Russian Federation (...). I will make every effort to continue serving the Holy Orthodox Church and the faithful people with devotion," the Moldovan hierarch declared.

In 2023, Metropolitan Vladimir strongly criticized Russia's invasion of Ukraine in a letter to Patriarch Kirill. He described Moscow's attitude toward Moldovans as "condescending" and accused the Russian Orthodox Church of "abandoning" the Church in Moldova. In Vladimir's view, the war in Ukraine and the many mistakes made by Russia toward Orthodox believers in Moldova will lead to the country soon uniting with Romania. He counts among these mistakes the ignoring of the Latin roots of the Moldovan nation and the fact that most Moldovans identify with the autocephalous Romanian Orthodox Church. Because of Russia's war, the Moldovan Orthodox Church, which remains under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate, is currently – according to the Metropolitan – perceived by Moldovans as a "promoter of a war blessed by Patriarch Kirill himself." As a result of the war, it is losing credibility, becoming "a secondary and useless element on the religious, social and cultural scene of this country." Vladimir also warned against attempts by Russia to use force in Moldova and against actions aimed at "dragging" Moldova into the so-called "Russian World." In this context, it is worth adding that Metropolitan Vladimir was born in Ukraine's Chernivtsi region, in a locality inhabited mainly by Romanians.

Despite the concern expressed in his letter, Vladimir actively participates in the meetings of the Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church, which makes decisions about implementing the Kremlin's agenda in the Ukrainian regions occupied by Russia. The highest forum of the Russian Church has also decided to involve some Russian-controlled NGOs dealing with spiritual and educational issues in the implementation of Moscow's national policy. These are soft-power activities that fit into the political doctrine of the "Russian World." In 2024, the portal anticoruptie.md wrote about

the active support that the Russian Orthodox Church provides for the development of propagandistic centers of “spiritual education,” which are to be established in the occupied areas of Luhansk, Rovenky, Donetsk, and in Zaporizhzhia oblast. In Patriarch Kirill’s rhetoric, all five bishops who are permanent members of the Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church and the dioceses they govern form the geography of the “Russian World.” Besides Vladimir as Metropolitan of Chişinău and All Moldova, these are: Onufry, Metropolitan of Kyiv and All Ukraine; Barsanuphius, Metropolitan of St. Petersburg and Ladoga; and Vikentiy, Metropolitan of Tashkent and Uzbekistan.

In May 2023, during a Synod meeting, Metropolitan Vladimir also took part in appointing Dmitry Vasilenkov, a cleric of the St. Petersburg diocese, as Chief Military Priest – a new position overseeing Church activity in the territories of Ukraine occupied by Russia (Vasilenkov is responsible for the “spiritual guidance of soldiers and employees of Russia’s security services” fighting as part of the “special military operation”). As the cleric wrote on VKontakte: “The spiritual guidance of military priests has a tremendous impact on the army’s morale”; “In the current difficult period of war, it is extremely necessary to organize systematic work by priests among the soldiers. This requires serious work both from the Ministry of Defense and from the Russian Orthodox Church.” Vasilenkov also argued that neglecting this issue would lead to military defeats and problems for Russia.

Meanwhile, the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) accuses the Russian Orthodox Church and the religious structures subordinate to it of supporting the war against Ukraine and of denying the crimes committed by the Russian military against civilians in the occupied territory. Patriarch Kirill is accused of belonging to the narrow circle of Russia’s political and military leaders responsible for this war. He appears on the sanctions lists of the United Kingdom and the Czech Republic as a representative of the ruling elite who approves and supports Russia’s military invasion of Ukraine. Metropolitan Vladimir’s cooperation with Kirill I within the Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church is therefore – according to Pavel Borsevschi, parish priest of the Church of St. Demetrius in Chişinău – sufficient reason for the Ukrainian authorities to designate the Moldovan Metropolitan persona non grata. Bishop Ioan of Soroca, responsible for communications at the Metropolis of Moldova, dismissed this view as mere rumor. He also noted that Vladimir has been an active member of the patriarchal forum since 2000, and that his participation in the Synod

meetings at which decisions on the situation in Ukraine were adopted does not mean that he supports them. The bishop clarified that Metropolitan Vladimir does not recognize Ukraine's separatist regions. "(...) Ukraine is an integral country, and we want peace to be restored in that country (...). We do not engage in political matters," he added.

Despite his close ties with representatives of the pro-Russian separatist regime in Tiraspol and his status as a permanent member of the Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church, Metropolitan Vladimir considers himself a victim of alleged slander spread by the Moldovan mass media. Although he publicly condemned Russia's war against Ukraine, in October 2022 he was decorated by Kirill I with one of the highest honors of the Moscow Patriarchate. Thanking Kirill, Vladimir declared that "the Orthodox Church of Moldova will continue to follow the same path of unity and steadfastness in the faith."

Moldova's Deputy Prime Minister responsible for the reintegration of the Transnistria region, Oleg Serebrian, explicitly calls the Church an ideological instrument and part of hybrid warfare, while arguing that Vladimir Putin has restored the Church's role as a geopolitical tool. In turn, Victor Gotisan, a political and religious expert, commenting on the 2019 parliamentary elections, identified the Church, the mass media, and pro-Russian parties as the three main channels of the Russian Federation's influence on Moldova's internal affairs.

3. Key FIMI Resources

a) Companies

Companies are an important element in the implementation of FIMI operations because they provide flexible tools for influencing the economies, societies, and even the military structures of other countries. Their activities often remain in the grey zone, allowing sponsoring states to avoid direct responsibility for the actions carried out. In such operations, companies serve as instruments of influence and as a cover for state activities.

In *Moldovagaz*, a joint-stock company operating in the natural gas sector in Moldova, the largest share (approx. 50% plus one share) is held by the Russian company *Gazprom*, which gives the corporation control over strategic decisions. Although the second largest shareholder is the

Moldovan government (approx. 36% of shares), under Russia's influence remains also the administration of the separatist region of Transnistria, which holds about 14% of shares. **This ownership structure, with Russia's dominant influence, makes the company an instrument of both economic and geopolitical leverage, as well as a tool in the information war.**

Gazprom makes Moldova heavily dependent on Russian gas supplies, and **the significant debt owed by Moldova to the corporation – amounting to hundreds of millions of dollars – is used as a means of economic pressure.** It creates opportunities to manipulate the prices of gas supplied to Moldova and to differentiate conditions depending on political priorities. Negotiations over gas contracts have often been tied to political demands directed at the Moldovan government. Increasingly, Moldovan authorities have questioned the legitimacy of the debt, accusing Gazprom of financial manipulations aimed at exerting political influence. They argue that part of the debt is undocumented and that the non-transparent financial operations are being used by the Kremlin as a tool in its struggle for regional dominance. This is supported by the results of an external audit of Moldovagaz's so-called historical debt, most of which is either unsubstantiated in documentation or unenforceable due to expired arbitration rulings. Gazprom categorically rejected the audit's findings.

The economic troubles of Moldovagaz highlight the need for Moldova to free itself from dependence on Russian gas supplies, which aligns with Chişinău's broader efforts to reduce Russia's influence in the energy sector. Since August 2021, the pro-Western Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) government has managed to significantly diversify gas imports. Although Russian gas continues to be supplied to the separatist pro-Russian Transnistria, in December 2022 Chişinău reduced its purchases of Russian gas. As a result of the energy crisis and the drive to diversify energy sources, Moldova began purchasing gas from the European market, with *Energocom* – a company fully owned by the Moldovan state treasury – acting as the main intermediary in this process. Energocom organizes tenders for gas procurement from alternative sources, while Moldovagaz distributes gas to Moldovan consumers. The gas is stored in Romania and Ukraine. The process of Moldova's disengagement from Russian gas is ongoing. In April 2024, the U.S. Embassy in Chişinău congratulated the Moldovan government and Energocom on their first "test" purchase of liquefied natural gas (LNG) from America through the Greek LNG terminal in Alexandroupolis, emphasizing that this was another step toward strengthening Moldova's energy

security. It was stressed that the United States supports Moldova's efforts to "free itself from energy blackmail and secure its path to a European future."

Energy dependence is also used to strengthen pro-Russian political parties and narratives in Moldova. Gazprom and pro-Russian media spread the message that Moldova cannot ensure stable energy supplies without Russia's support, thereby undermining trust in Chişinău's authorities. Destabilizing narratives also take on an anti-EU dimension, being used to attack the EU's energy diversification policy and weaken trust in European institutions. Despite Moscow's suggestions, the Kremlin currently has a limited range of instruments to apply economic and energy pressure on Moldova. A potential suspension of Russian gas supplies could lead to an electricity crisis in Transnistria. However, considering the strategic importance Russia places on the region it controls, a serious disruption to its functioning seems unlikely. It should also be noted that in 2017, *Ziarul de Gardă* revealed irregularities connected to the assets of Vasile Botnari, then chairman of the board of Moldovagaz. Botnari was closely associated with the Democratic Party of Moldova (PDM) and its leader – oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc – accused of favoring Russian economic interests. Repeated accusations that Moldovagaz was acting in Gazprom's interest could, in practice, have reinforced Russian dominance in Moldova's energy sector.

In the context of information manipulation and foreign interference, *Intertelecom* – a mobile operator in Ukraine – also holds particular significance. The company was established in 1998 by Ukrainian citizen Vladislav Sukhodolskiy and businessmen Viktor Gusan and Ilia Kazmaly, who registered it as Russian citizens residing in Transnistria. The operator's Facebook account has more than 4,700 followers, and its VKontakte account has more than 17,000 followers.

Between 2000 and 2002, the director of Intertelecom was Sergey Ganja, who eight years later became director of *Interdnestrcom*, the main telecommunications provider in Transnistria. Both companies were also linked to Boris Akulov, who was involved in the development of the region's telecommunications infrastructure. In 2016, Intertelecom's ownership structure consisted of 49% held by the Cypriot offshore company *Odinaco Ltd.* (according to the Ukrainian business register, the ultimate beneficiary was Gusan), another 35.7% directly to Gusan, and the remaining 15.3% to Larisa Gavriliuk from Kyiv and Tatyana Krestyankina from Donetsk. Records from Ukraine's

Ministry of Justice indicate that in 2020, the ultimate beneficiaries were Ilia Kazmaly, Daria Kazmaly, and Victor Ukrainets.

In 2014, two months after Russia's annexation of Crimea, *Intertelecom* was established in Simferopol, Crimea, by Veaceslav Chernikevich. Although formally registered in Russia with no official ties to the Ukrainian operator, Chernikevich is identified as being close to Gusan and had previously worked as a commercial director at Interdnestrcom. Half a year after its registration, the Crimean Intertelecom received a license to provide internet and mobile phone services across the peninsula. Like the Ukrainian Intertelecom and Transnistrian Interdnestrcom, the Russian Intertelecom used CDMA technology. In 2016, the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) launched an investigation into the Russian Intertelecom over suspicions of intercepting telephone conversations on behalf of Russia.

Transnistrian oligarchs Gusan and Kazmaly are also directly linked to several German companies, including *Tirastel GmbH*, registered in Wiesbaden in 2004 and managed by Andreas and Irina Reich. Tirastel GmbH specializes in providing telecommunications, connectivity, transmission systems, and internet equipment solutions. Among its clients importing telecommunications equipment and infrastructure is the aforementioned Interdnestrcom. The same names also appear in connection with *Kartina Digital GmbH*, founded in 2008 by Reich (50% of shares), Gusan (25%), and Kazmaly (25%). It serves as a provider of technology and infrastructure for the operation of *Kartina TV*, which offers internet television services in Germany and across Europe. **Kartina TV carries more than 200 Russian TV channels, including those promoting anti-EU and anti-NATO propaganda editorially subordinated to the Kremlin.** It also has a vast archive of films, series, and television programs (including political content). Kartina TV is a business owned by Evgeniy Romaskievich, son-in-law of Russian oligarch Arkady Rotenberg, who is also Vladimir Putin's judo partner. Kartina TV has 602,000 followers on Facebook, 121,000 followers on TikTok, 146,000 subscribers on YouTube, 550 subscribers on Telegram, more than 108,000 members on Odnoklassniki, and more than 10,000 followers on X. The platform enjoys popularity in Transnistria, which is significant in the context of the dominance of Russian "media culture" in the region.

In the context of Gagauzia, it is worth mentioning the *World Turkish Business Council Congress*, which aims to build the influence of Turkish lobbying abroad through the development of commercial and economic activities. The initiative also provides an opportunity to shape a positive image of the country on the international stage. It is intended to bring together the most successful representatives of the Turkish diaspora worldwide. During the 10th edition of the Congress, held in Istanbul in September 2023, more than 2,000 members of the diaspora participated – Turkish and pro-Turkish entrepreneurs living abroad, managers of international companies, economists, experts, as well as artists, athletes, politicians, bureaucrats, and academics. The program included a session entitled “*Our Soft Power: The Turkish Diaspora*”, moderated by Oğuzhan Bilgin, director of the Diplomacy Foundation promoting Turkish foreign policy and public diplomacy. Bilgin is also a member of the Board of Turkish Radio and Television and a media personality who regularly appears on television programs. His statements express Turkish conservatism, and his posts on platform X (@oguzhanbilgin) are followed by more than 46,000 users. On the second day of the Congress, among those invited to deliver an inaugural speech in the panel entitled “*Joining Forces with Friendly Diasporas*” was Evghenia Guțul, who has served as Bashkan of Gagauzia since 2023. The Congress was organized under the patronage of the Foreign Economic Relations Board of Turkey, chaired by Nail Olpak.

b) NGOs

A non-profit organization that functions as a tool of Russian foreign policy and influences Moldova’s internal affairs is *Evrazia*. Its ties reach into pro-Kremlin structures, such as *United Russia* (the chairwoman of Evrazia’s board, Alona Arshinova, is also deputy chair of the ruling faction), as well as Ilan Şor, who finances anti-European activities in Moldova. On the organization’s website it is stated that it is devoted to “strengthening mutually beneficial integration processes in the post-Soviet space.” In videos posted on Telegram, smiling young visitors from Moldova express their excitement about traveling to Russia. They say: “I always dreamed of getting to know Russia’s culture and history,” “My name is Mikhail and I come from Moldova. During my stay in Moscow, I liked the Kremlin the most. You know why? Because it is another goal we achieved thanks to Evrazia.” Sponsored trips to Moscow are just one of the organization’s many projects. Frequent posts on Telegram show the dizzying pace of the organization’s activities, since it only officially began operating in 2024. According to the posts,

within a few months its representatives had already taken part in Astronomy Day in Armenia, an international cultural forum in St. Petersburg, and even sent Kyrgyzstan one hundred school buses.

According to *CU SENS*, an independent Moldovan outlet, **Evrazia is simultaneously both a channel for illegal financial flows amounting to tens of millions of dollars and an instrument of interference in the referendum on Moldova's accession to the European Union (EU).** In early October 2024, Moldovan police and prosecutors announced that about 130,000 citizens had received a total of \$15 million from Șor in exchange for casting a vote against Moldova's EU integration or for helping to persuade others to do so. On Telegram, a special chatbot "STOP UE/CTOII EC" was launched, through which Evrazia recruited "ambassadors" opposing European integration. Payments organized via Telegram ranged from \$50 per month for supporters of the anti-EU campaign to over \$2,500 per month for its leaders. The payments were allegedly made illegally through the sanctioned Russian *Promsvyazbank*, headed by Pyotr Fradkov – the son of the former director of Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR). Promsvyazbank was said to have received funds from Evrazia. "Our scale is much bigger, all these numbers are underestimated," "You're counting like kindergarteners," Șor scoffed on Telegram in response to the accusations by police and prosecutors. In a later post, he argued that Evrazia's activities were legal and amounted to paying employees "salaries" for "explaining to people the advantages of the Eurasian economic space." In October, Telegram blocked the channels belonging to Evrazia, Șor, and several Moldovan politicians allied with them for "violating local laws."

Payment "for votes" is just one of the Russian organization's initiatives. Other methods of transferring funds to Moldova include "humanitarian aid" to tens of thousands of pensioners in several regions, grants of up to \$31,000 for activists supporting the building of "friendly relations among the nations of post-Soviet countries," as well as \$250 million for unspecified Moldovan infrastructure projects. Evrazia is also expanding the recruitment of the younger generation to support its broader ideological mission, offering them the aforementioned trips to Moscow. According to a co-founder of Watchdog.md, in this case young people serve as couriers transporting cash into Moldova to finance Șor's activities. His actions are said to be supported by Russian oligarchs. Data collected by Moldovan security agencies also indicate that since June 2024, more than 300 young people have traveled outside Moldova to train in organizing mass riots.

Organized transport allowed them to reach a base on the outskirts of Moscow, where they were taught destabilizing tactics: procedures and methods used in protest actions, appropriate behavior, provocative tactics, resistance against law enforcement interventions, as well as rapid withdrawal from crowds. Smaller groups of young people were selected for more advanced training, which was organized in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, with instructors including members of the paramilitary *Wagner Group*.

Given the above activities, Evrazia's influence from the perspective of FIMI can be classified in the following areas: geopolitical (seeking to weaken Moldova's ties with the West and support Russian interests in former Soviet republics), ideological (promoting ideology favorable to Russian imperialism), security (generating internal tensions and destabilizing Moldova's political situation), identity (undermining Moldovan national identity and strengthening ties with Russia), as well as economic (supporting economic integration with Russia).

Another example is the *Moldovan-Russian Business Union (MRBU)* promoted by Igor Dodon, which receives funding from Russian entrepreneurs. Among the main objectives of its activities, Dodon as union president cites: attracting strategic Russian investors willing to invest in Moldovan enterprises and create new jobs; helping businesses find partners and strengthen trade links; and providing social and humanitarian assistance. Outlining the union's priorities, Dodon referred to the support of Igor Chaika, one of the MRBU's co-founders and at the same time the business ambassador of *Business Russia* in Moldova. *Business Russia* is the largest association of entrepreneurs in the Russian Federation, bringing together 7,000 members, generating a turnover of about \$40 billion, and employing more than 3 million people in various sectors. Chaika, associated with the association, is the son of Yuri Chaika – the former Prosecutor General of Russia, who since 2020 has served as the presidential plenipotentiary representative in the North Caucasus Federal District. MRBU's Facebook account has 3,800 followers.

In the context of foreign interference, MRBU can be analyzed in terms of economic, geopolitical, and informational influence. As a platform for promoting Russian interests in the region, it becomes a counterweight to the pro-Western aspirations of Moldova's government. Serving as a channel for Moscow to influence Moldova's politics, it has the potential to support the Russian narrative. This potential is manifested, for example, in spreading pro-Russian sentiment among

Moldovan society and promoting pro-Russian attitudes in the media – particularly in the context of organized events. As part of its activities, MRBU has planned a number of webinars and roundtables on the investment attractiveness of the Republic of Moldova and sectoral cooperation priorities, as well as support for organizing the Moldovan-Russian Economic Forum.

Another organization – the *Russkiy Mir Foundation* – was established in 2007 by presidential decree of Vladimir Putin. The organization was to cooperate with Russia's Ministry of Education and Ministry of Foreign Affairs to support Russian culture and language abroad – especially in regions where Russian diasporas exist. The foundation operates through Russian Science and Culture Centers in Comrat, Tiraspol, Bălți, and Chișinău. These so-called “Centers of the Russian World,” which promote, among other things, literature and art, are in practice often linked to Russian foreign policy. The idea is used to justify Moscow's actions in countries with significant numbers of Russian-speaking citizens, for example in the context of the alleged need to protect “Russian brothers” from external threats. Although the organization's influence seems focused on the ideological and identity spheres, in practice it also includes geopolitical issues. By establishing cultural centers, promoting Russia-related events, and supporting the Russian diaspora, *Russkiy Mir* strengthens Russia's influence in regions of strategic geopolitical importance, such as Crimea or Donbas. The dissemination of pro-Russian narratives in the media, as well as cooperation with journalists promoting Kremlin narratives, also falls within the informational sphere of the foundation's activities. The *Russkiy Mir* account has over 4,000 subscribers on VKontakte and more than 25,000 on YouTube.

c) Opinion Leaders

At the end of 2023, Maia Sandu became the target of an online influence operation carried out by pro-Kremlin entities. On the TikTok account @oleg_spb2, a video appeared in which American public figures with large followings – Dolph Lundgren, Lindsay Lohan, Brian Baumgartner, Eric Roberts, Michael Madsen, Mark Dacascos, and rapper Xzibit – jointly called for the overthrow of Sandu as president of Moldova. The film, entitled “*An Urgent Appeal from Hollywood Stars to Maia Sandu*”, ended with each figure reading in Russian the phrase: “*Let's destroy Sandu.*” The celebrities involved had active accounts on the Cameo platform, through which users can order recordings of specific messages such as advice, congratulations, or announcements. It is

considered highly likely that the artists were unaware of the true meaning of the words they were reading, which may have been accompanied by their English-language but misleading translation. The @oleg_spb2 account published more than 200 videos – mostly featuring content from Kremlin-linked propaganda talk shows. The videos consistently promoted pro-Russian narratives. The account is currently inactive, though it is difficult to determine whether this was the result of voluntary deactivation or removal from the platform.

Among Russian opinion leaders one can name Vladimir Solovyov – a “journalist,” television presenter, and political commentator. As recently as 2013, Solovyov described Crimea as “legally belonging to Ukraine,” but after 2014 he changed his stance, becoming an uncritical supporter of Vladimir Putin. The journalist uses his television platform to spread Kremlin propaganda. Solovyov has repeatedly disinforming by claiming that: Ukrainians kill their own civilians in order to then accuse Russians of the crime; the British were responsible for the mass killing of civilians in Bucha; the United States intends to destroy Russia and seize its nuclear weapons; and that the poisonings of Sergei Skripal and Alexei Navalny were Western provocations aimed at blaming Russia. Solovyov’s Telegram account has more than one million subscribers. Meanwhile, the propagandist’s YouTube channel was blocked for violating the service’s rules on promoting violence.

One of the most prominent figures in Russian state media is Margarita Simonyan, journalist, columnist, and editor-in-chief of *Russia Today* and the news agency *Rossiia Segodnya*. Simonyan plays a key role in promoting the Kremlin’s narratives both in Russia and abroad. The European Union imposed sanctions on her, calling her a “central figure” of Russian propaganda. She refers to the Russo-Ukrainian war as a “civil war,” claiming that Russia is supporting ethnic Russians in their fight against “Russophobes.” According to the U.S. State Department, both *Russia Today* and its staff, including Simonyan, directly supported the Russian government’s efforts to influence Moldova’s presidential elections in October 2024. In this context, Simonyan has been accused of seeking to incite unrest in Moldova.

International politics is the area of interest of Konstantin Viktorovich Syomin, a Russian journalist, columnist, and blogger who also collaborates with *Russia Today*. His media activities are one of the elements of Russian informational influence. Syomin criticizes Western

interventions in post-Soviet regions. His YouTube channel has 820,000 subscribers, his Telegram account has more than 116,000, and on X he has 60,000 followers.

Another opinion leader is Oleg Ozerov, who since 2020 has served as Russia's ambassador to Moldova. His controversial comments – that Moldova's economic situation is dependent on trade ties with Russia – are identified by the Moldovan Ministry of Foreign Affairs as “false and baseless.” More than 65% of Moldova's exports go to European Union (EU) countries. Even the Transnistrian region exports more than 80% of its goods to the EU. The Ministry has also strongly opposed Ozerov's doubts regarding the country's neutrality. “The Republic of Moldova will not tolerate attempts at disinformation and undermining the truth. The appointed ambassador is asked to strictly adhere to diplomatic norms and focus on real solutions for the benefit of citizens of both countries, not on propaganda,” the Ministry appealed in November 2024.

In the context of FIMI, it is also worth mentioning the head of Russian foreign intelligence (SVR), Sergey Naryshkin. At a meeting of CIS security and intelligence chiefs held in November 2024 in Moscow, Naryshkin declared: “Everywhere the West has extended its tentacles, we see divisions and destabilization. The most striking example is Ukraine.” In line with the core of Russian propaganda, he described Ukraine as a “failed state” that “is incapable of maintaining its existence as a real political and economic entity.” Naryshkin stated that Moldova is “following Ukraine's path,” adding that “the totalitarian policy of President [Maia Sandu – ed.] has led to catastrophic polarization of society.”

Also criticized for pro-Kremlin views is Serbian sculptor Dragan Radenovic, who simultaneously serves as president of the “Russians” Charitable Foundation. He has close ties with Leonid Manakov, Moscow's representative in separatist Transnistrian Tiraspol.

d) Religious Leaders

Clerics whose positions resonate in Moldova's information space include Kirill I (Vladimir Mikhailovich Gundyayev), who serves as Patriarch of Moscow and All Rus', as well as one of his closest collaborators and the former head of the Department for External Church Relations of the Russian Orthodox Church – Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev. Both leaders shape public opinion by linking religious issues with political ones. Particular resonance was caused by a letter from

Vladimir, Metropolitan of Chişinău and All Moldova, addressed to Patriarch Kirill of Moscow in September 2023. The letter was published by Vlad Cubryakov, a former member of the Moldovan Parliament and former vice-chairman of the Christian Democratic People's Party. The authenticity of the publication was later confirmed by the press secretary of the Moldovan Metropolis. In the letter, Metropolitan Vladimir lamented the situation of the Orthodox Church in Moldova, which had come to be perceived by Moldovan society as a “bridgehead of the Kremlin and an advocate of the Russian invasion of Ukraine,” with its presence in the public sphere becoming increasingly unwelcome due to its direct ties with Russia. According to the Metropolitan of Chişinău, a trend that worries the faithful and clergy is the “increasingly insistent desire of the Moscow Patriarchate to absorb the Metropolis of Moldova into the so-called ‘Russian World,’ alien (...) [to their – ed.] national aspirations and values.” The letter also included an accusation regarding the lack of support and respect from the Russian Orthodox Church toward the Metropolis of Moldova, as well as the issue of Transnistria, where bishops are said to be appointed without the consent of the Metropolitan of Chişinău and All Moldova and the Synod of the Orthodox Church of Moldova.

Moldova is also subject to the influence of Diyanet – the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs, chaired by Ali Erbaş, one of Turkey's most important religious leaders. His public statements, strongly conservative, exert influence on the policies of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. He has repeatedly criticized European states for what he considers harmful treatment of Islam, as well as for migration policies, particularly toward refugees from Syria. Erbaş also criticizes Western moral values, accusing the West of promoting secularism that leads to a crisis of family values and social disintegration. Erbaş's Instagram account has more than 390,000 followers, his Facebook account 244,000 users, while on the X platform he has gathered more than 572,000 followers.

e) Political Leaders

An example of Russia's political and ideological influence in Moldova is the activity of Artem Turov, a member of Russia's State Duma affiliated with *United Russia*, within which he also served as a representative for Transnistria. His activity includes regular visits to Transnistria, participation in the region's political events, and cooperation with its pro-Russian leaders. Turov

promotes narratives about the need to protect the rights of the Russian-speaking population and the necessity of maintaining close ties with Russia.

A political leader involved in negotiations concerning Transnistria and conflicts in the post-Soviet space is Russian diplomat Dmitry Kozak, former adviser to Vladimir Putin on foreign policy. His strong opposition to Maia Sandu's pro-Western orientation can be interpreted as an element of pro-Russian influence in the countries of the former Soviet Union. Kozak is also the architect of the failed 2003 federalization of the Republic of Moldova. Another pro-Russian voice in Transnistria is Leonid Manakov, Moscow's representative in Tiraspol and head of the *Foundation for the Development of Socio-Cultural Relations of Transnistria*. Manakov calls on the international community to recognize the region's independence.

Perceptions of the situation in Moldova are also shaped by Dmitry Peskov, Kremlin spokesman and one of Vladimir Putin's key associates. Peskov helped conduct disinformation campaigns aimed at concealing the Kremlin's involvement in the poisonings of Alexander Litvinenko (2006), Sergei Skripal (2018), and Alexei Navalny (2020). He dismissed accusations against Russians for the brutal killings of civilians in Bucha as "groundless," calling them a "well-staged tragic performance" and a "forgery aimed at discrediting the Russian army." Peskov is thus identified as the "voice of the Kremlin," with his public statements predictably emphasizing Russia's strategic interests. Commenting on Moldova's 2024 presidential elections, Peskov claimed that they were neither democratic nor fair. He argued that "hundreds of thousands of Moldovans living in Russia were not allowed to vote," unlike Moldovans residing in the West, whose votes decided Maia Sandu's victory.

Although Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko avoided public statements specifically about Sandu, the narratives he propagated also boiled down to criticism of Western interference in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, as well as support for pro-Russian policies in the region. His clear orientation was often expressed in the support he extended to leaders with similar views.

f) Military Leaders (Transnistria as a proxy)

The involvement of Russian commanders in plans to destabilize the region and subordinate Moldova to Moscow's interests is especially visible in separatist Transnistria. Regional security structures, closely tied to Moscow, actively carry out actions aimed at weakening Moldova's pro-European aspirations. For the Kremlin, Transnistria is a tool used to pursue political, military, and intelligence goals without direct engagement in potential conflicts.

At the tactical level, the Transnistrian KGB serves as an extension of Russian special services, conducting espionage operations against Moldova, Ukraine, and EU countries. These activities are supported by disinformation campaigns carried out through local TV stations and pro-Russian online portals. Transnistrian media spread anti-Western narratives and, during election periods, promote pro-Russian candidates. The main information channel in the region is TSV, owned by Sheriff Group, founded by former KGB officers. This oligarchic structure also finances pro-Russian political parties, with particular support given to the Șor Party. Transnistria itself is perceived as a key hub for money laundering used to finance pro-Russian initiatives in the region.

The tactical level also includes about 1,500 Russian soldiers of the so-called Operational Group of Russian Forces (OGRF), stationed in Transnistria. The group formally declares that its task is to guard weapons depots in Cobasna, which contain large amounts of ammunition left over from the Soviet Army. In reality, the OGRF has both military and political significance, playing a key role in maintaining Russian influence in the region. Regular OGRF exercises with Transnistria's local armed forces serve as demonstrations of strength and a form of intimidation against Moldova and Ukraine. The stationing of Russian troops in the region, close ties with Russian special services, and Transnistrian separatism also make the region a potential operational base for cyber activities targeting Moldova's critical infrastructure.

Transnistrian security structures involved in disinformation, military provocations, financial manipulation, and supporting separatist narratives are headed by, among others, Vadim Krasnoselsky, Vitaly Nyagu, and Oleg Belakov.

Krasnoselsky, president of Transnistria since December 2016, regularly accuses Moldova and Ukraine of provocations and actions threatening the region's stability. He is perceived as

a Kremlin puppet, with his policies reduced to maintaining separatism and strengthening Russian influence in Transnistria. In 2007 Krasnoselsky became Transnistria's Minister of Internal Affairs, and in the following decade served as head of security for one of Sheriff's companies. In 2015, in Transnistria's parliamentary elections, he won a deputy's mandate on behalf of a party sponsored by Sheriff Group, and a year later succeeded in the region's presidential elections. Although he ran as an independent candidate, analysts believe that in reality he represented Sheriff's interests at the time.

In 2016, Krasnoselsky decided to transform the Transnistrian State Security Committee into the Ministry of State Security. According to the decree, it is the president of Transnistria, as Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, who directs the work of security services. Their main tasks include intelligence, counterintelligence and border activities, combating organized crime, terrorism and extremism, as well as ensuring information security. The Minister of State Security is Colonel General Valery Dmitrievich Gebos.

Nyagu, Minister of Internal Affairs of Transnistria since July 2021, heads the region's police forces, which are used, among other things, to suppress pro-government protests. Nyagu shares the concept of the Russian World. In 2019 he emphasized: "(...) Transnistria, just like two centuries ago, remains a bridgehead of the Russian World in the region. (...) The Transnistrian State Customs Committee stands for the protection of the economic interests not only of its own republic but also of Russia." Nyagu is a member of the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society, which developed as an unofficial diplomatic tool for Russians – although it was a civil and religious organization, its activity had a strong political dimension and was closely linked to Russian interests. The Society awarded Nyagu the E.M. Primakov Medal. In 2019, on the initiative of the Russian Orthodox Church, the minister also received the Order of Merit for the Church, 2nd class. At the same time, Krasnoselsky was awarded the 1st class order. It should be added that between 2008 and 2012, Nyagu worked as a legal consultant for Sheriff's legal department.

Belakov serves as co-chairman of Transnistria's Grand Coordinating Coalition – a political structure that integrates pro-Russian forces in Transnistria. The coalition aims to strengthen pro-Russian influence in the region and plays a key role in coordinating activities supporting pro-Russian media, organizing demonstrations, and lobbying for maintaining Transnistrian separatism.

In Russia, at the strategic level, interest in Transnistria has been expressed by, among others, Sergei Shoigu, Russia's Minister of Defense. A key planner of Russia's military strategy, in his public statements he emphasized the justification for the presence of Russian troops in Transnistria, which he explained as the need to ensure stability in the region. This is a motif that Russia uses as an instrument of influence, stressing Moldova's neutrality and the special status of Transnistria as key conditions for negotiations. Maintaining influence in border regions of the former Soviet republics is also supported by Alexander Pavlovich Lapin, commander of the Central Military District in 2017–2022, Chief of Staff of the Ground Forces in 2023–2024, and since March 2024 commander of the Leningrad Military District.

The involvement of Russian military commanders in plans to destabilize the region and subordinate Moldova to Moscow's interests is also demonstrated by statements from Russian General Rustam Minnekayev. In April 2022, the deputy commander of Russia's Central Military District publicly stated that seizing southern Ukraine would make it possible to gain better access to Transnistria, where "cases of persecution of Russian-speaking people occur." Following Minnekayev's remarks, Moldova's Ministry of Foreign Affairs summoned the Russian ambassador. Expressing deep concern over the Russian general's statement, the Ministry appealed for respect for Moldova's territorial sovereignty and neutrality.

In summary, Transnistria's security structures play a key role in Russia's operations targeting Moldova. Their activities include supporting separatist narratives, spreading disinformation, conducting military provocations, and financial manipulations. The goal of these actions is to weaken Moldova's sovereignty, counter the country's integration with the European Union, and maintain Russia's influence. Transnistrian leaders regularly present the region as an independent state, and their narrative is supported by Moscow both financially and through propaganda.

g) Traditional Media

Many television stations whose licenses were suspended in recent years by the Commission for Emergency Situations moved to the frequencies of other stations. NTV Moldova moved to EXCLUSIV TV – both entities are owned by *Exclusiv Media S.R.L.*, whose director is Ludmila Furculiță, the wife of Corneliu Furculiță, a deputy of the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM). Programs of RTR Moldova are currently broadcast on the station Cinema 1,

owned by *Srlavideo-Content*, which belongs to Irina Stețco. The holder of the broadcasting license for RTR Moldova is *TV-Comunicatii Grup S.R.L.*, 50% of which is owned by the Russian NGO *Rosmediacom* (*Russian Society for the Organization and Management of Projects in the Field of Mass Information and Mass Communication*). The other 25% belongs to Valentina Stețco and 25% to Sb Grup Media SRL. The director of RTR Moldova is Evgenii Sergheev. Meanwhile, ORIZONT TV, host of TV6, is part of *Srl Archidoc Group*, founded by Irina Gușan and managed by Victor Gușan. Television linked to the Șor Party belongs to *Media Resource S.R.L.*, managed by Dumitru Chitoroaga. After changing frequencies, each of the stations launched massive promotional campaigns in order not to lose their existing audiences. Despite these intensified efforts, data from Google Trends nevertheless indicate a decline in the interest index for RTR Moldova and Publika TV, correlated in time with the withdrawal of their licenses. It should be added that search rates for RTR Moldova are highest in Gagauzia, while in the rest of the country searches for Publika TV dominate.

The predominantly Russian-speaking residents of Transnistria and Gagauzia are largely exposed to Russian propaganda content. In Transnistria there are about 50 mass media outlets, which are not subject to Moldovan national legislation nor registered with the Public Services Agency in Chișinău. Most of them are controlled by the opaque authorities in Tiraspol as well as the Sheriff holding company connected with Gușan. The holding dominates the private media market. It includes the TSV television station and several radio stations (Radio Inter, Radio Chanson, Radio Dacha, Dorojnoe Radio). Sheriff also exerts control over the broadcasts of the television station *Pervii Pridnestrovskii*, established in the 1990s as a propaganda instrument for the separatist local authorities, despite the fact that this station is funded from the budget of the separatist region. *Pervii Pridnestrovskii*, along with *Radio Pridnestrovia* and the news agency *Novosti Pridnestrovia* (Novosti PMR), belong to the Transnistrian State Television and Radio Enterprise.

The so-called Transnistrian authorities also own the newspapers *Pridnestrovie*, *Adevărul Nistrean* and *Gomin*, which are published in both print and digital versions. It should be emphasized, however, that among the Russian-language press the most popular in Moldova is *Komsomolskaya Pravda*.

In the context of the Gagauz, as an ethnic group of Turkish origin, it is also worth noting the Anadolu Agency (AA). The editorial line of this Turkish state-funded outlet strongly supports the policies of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government and reflects the interests of the ruling party. The president of AA is Şenol Kazancı, and its editor-in-chief is Mustafa Fuat Er. The agency also distributes news through social media – its Facebook account (*anadolujansi*) has 4.3 million followers. A similar number of users follow the agency's X account (@anadolujansi). On YouTube, the account @anadolujansi has gathered 729,000 subscribers. Among news agencies – in the context of foreign interference in the information sphere – Russia's TASS and RIA Novosti should also be mentioned.

h) Non-Traditional Media

Although between 2022 and 2024 Russian influence in the audiovisual environment decreased as a result of the suspension of licenses for numerous Russian television stations, it remains strong in the online environment, particularly on social networks. Assessing Russia's involvement in the electoral processes in Moldova in 2024, the Information and Security Service asserted that the information space would continue to serve as the main instrument of influence, managed both at the level of Russian special services and at the level of Moldovan socio-political actors connected to Russia. Manipulations in the information sphere characterize many Russian pro-war channels (so-called *milbloggers* or *Z-bloggers*) available on Telegram, among which "Rybar" (with over 1 million subscribers) and its English-language version "Rybar in English" (with over 41,000 subscribers) stand out for their reach. An increase has also been noted in the number of propaganda channels on TikTok, as well as anonymous Facebook accounts spreading extremist content, testing reactions and estimating the number of their supporters.

Recalling the previously mentioned online influence operation targeting Maia Sandu, which in 2023 involved unsuspecting American entertainers, it is important to emphasize the scale of social media use in spreading manipulated content. The first to share the video from @oleg_spb2 on Telegram was the channel "ВОЗРОЖДЕНИЕ МОЛДОВЫ" ("Revival of Moldova"), which used graphics resembling the logo of the pro-Russian Revival Party. This channel was later renamed "Баба Папаска" ("Baba Paraska"). It was also involved in spreading disinformation about international military exercises in Moldova. The post quickly appeared on other channels,

including “Gagauznews – Новости Гагаузии” (over 8,000 subscribers), “Salut Moldova” (over 6,000 subscribers), “Пул N3” (over 342,000 subscribers), and “ZERGULIO” (over 380,000 subscribers). Each subsequent re-share of the video simultaneously promoted the channel where it was first posted. The recording was also shared by the Russian news agency *Eadaily.com*.

In the autonomous region of Gagauzia, one of the most influential news outlets remains *Gagauznews*, which was blocked after the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine but continued to operate by changing its domain from *gagauznews.md* to *gagauznews.com*. Manipulations in the information sphere are also noticeable on another Russian-language portal, *Gagauzinfo*.

i) Academic and Scientific Cooperation

The Russian Center of Science and Culture in Chişinău is a branch of *Rossotrudnichestvo* – a Russian government agency responsible for humanitarian cooperation and the promotion of Russian culture abroad. It was opened in February 2009 as the representative office of *Rossotrudnichestvo*, which had been operating in Moldova since 2002. Both entities function on the basis of a bilateral agreement between the governments of Moldova and Russia signed on October 30, 1998, and ratified by Law No. 204-XV of May 25, 2001. The Center is headed by Andrey Muravyov, formerly head of the equivalent Russian office in Malta, as well as a specialist in similar centers in Kyiv and India. Muravyov’s involvement in events organized by the outlawed Şor Party allows him to be identified as a supporter of Ilan Şor. Responsibility for the Transnistria region at the Center lies with Artyom Naumenkov, whose social media actively promote both the image of the Center and of Russia itself. The promotion of the pro-Russian identity of the Gagauzia region at the Center is carried out by Natalia Nenasheva.

Since 2021, there has been a significant decline in the number of projects implemented by the Russian Center of Science and Culture, as well as a decline in Moldovan citizens’ interest in events organized by the Center. The reasons lie in insufficient financial resources for its activities and in the distance Moldovan youth developed toward the Center after Russia’s full-scale aggression against Ukraine. At present, the Russian Center of Science and Culture in Chişinău avoids direct involvement in initiatives as organizer – it more often appears as a “supporter” of given activities. In this context, the Center’s support includes donations of books, clothing items bearing the Center’s logo, certificates of participation, and small trophies.

In 2022 – ignoring risks associated with the war – the Center mediated the organization of a trip for Moldovan children to the “Artek” camp on the Crimean Peninsula. In 2023, an attempt was made to repeat the initiative, but the trip was canceled due to the flight’s cancellation.

The main beneficiaries of projects launched by the Center are the Communities of Russian Compatriots in Chişinău and Drochia, as well as the organization “Victory Volunteers,” a branch of the youth organization of the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (“Youth Guard”). Young people associated with it were regularly invited to participate in events organized by the Center, as were members of the “NAŞ” (Anti-Crisis People’s Headquarters) organization, headed by Victor Petrov, a deputy of the Gagauz People’s Assembly.

It is worth noting that in February 2023, neighboring Romania closed the Russian Center of Science and Culture in Bucharest due to its clandestine propaganda activities, including justifying Russia’s war against Ukraine.

Although in the context of FIMI the influence of the Russian Center of Science and Culture should be considered mainly in the ideological-identity sphere, this influence is also used in a strictly political dimension. The instrumental use of the theme is illustrated by the February 2023 incident, when the Center in Chişinău was splashed with red paint. In pro-Western sources, the act of vandalism was described in the context of sabotage attacks and Russian plans to destabilize Moldova (e.g. @NOELreports on X, followed by over 471,000 users), while the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation portrayed the incident as an openly anti-Russian provocation.

The theme of scientific activity is regularly used for foreign manipulations of information. In recent years, Moldova has tightened its policy toward individuals who may support Russian influence, due to fears of destabilization and the country’s efforts to integrate with the European Union. This move has been criticized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, which argued that certain cases of denied entry were manifestations of alleged Russophobia on the part of Moldovan political leaders. The Ministry cited in these terms the May 2023 denial of entry to Russian biologist Alexander Panchen (@Scinquisitor on X, followed by more than 3,000 users), as well as the deportation of fifteen philologists from Russia, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan in September of the same year.

Foreign interference may be facilitated by the fact that all Moldovan higher education institutions – both private and state – are involved in broadly understood international cooperation. It is worth noting that among the entities with which Alecu Russo State University in pro-Russian Bălți has concluded international agreements is the “Russkiy Mir” Foundation. Strengthening cooperation with Russian higher education institutions is one of the main goals of international cooperation pursued by Taras Shevchenko State University in Transnistrian Tiraspol, while Dimitrie Cantemir University’s foreign partner is the Russian Peoples’ Friendship University, known for student exchanges and for promoting Russian culture, language, and values – thereby constituting an important instrument of Russian public diplomacy.

In the ideological-identity sphere, it is also worth mentioning the cooperation of the Gagauz National Theater “Dionis Tanasoglu” with the Turkish theatrical community. The Gagauz troupe stages performances at festivals throughout Turkey. It also participates in the annually organized International Theater Festival in Turkey. In this way, it promotes its own history and culture, while emphasizing in contacts with Turkish media the similarities between Gagauz customs and Turkish traditions. In *Anadolu Agency* coverage, the Gagauz are described as the “favorite” of Turkish theater festivals.

j) Military Cooperation and Non-State Armed Formations

A former government official who held key positions related to Russia’s defense policy and arms industry is Dmitry Rogozin, known for his controversial statements. His ideological stances often refer to military issues. As the former Special Representative of the President of Russia for Transnistria, Rogozin emphasized the need to protect this region, which fits into Moscow’s broader strategy of destabilizing Moldova through politico-military influence. Rogozin’s Russian-language account on X (@Rogozin) has more than 775,000 followers, while his English-language account (@DRogozin) has over 24,000. In his posts, Rogozin calls Joe Biden a “villain” and an “idiot,” while describing Donald Trump as a “brave politician.” He mocks Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Ukrainians, portraying the anti-war rallies they organize in America and Europe as efforts to “increase the level of Russophobia and boost the supply of deadly Western weapons to the Armed Forces of Ukraine.”

In the regional context, it is worth noting that Transnistria maintains its own armed forces, trained and financed by Moscow. This is an example of Russia's enduring military presence, using non-state formations as a tool of pressure on Moldova. In Russian media, the Wagner Group – a private military company linked to Russian military intelligence – was also presented as “possible support” in the event of conflict in Transnistria. Although these reports may have been only a form of psychological operations intended to reinforce fears of military escalation, in March 2024 a Russian citizen attempting to enter Transnistria was detained in Chişinău. He was identified as a former member of the Wagner Group. He was denied entry to Moldova under applicable security protocols, being classified as a high-risk individual.

Mercenaries from the Wagner Group also acted as instructors in the trainings for Moldovan youth in guerrilla warfare mentioned earlier in the context of Evrazia's activities. Most of these trainings were organized in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia from September to mid-October 2024. Their program included tactics for provoking law enforcement officers, the use of non-lethal and firearms, hand-to-hand combat, the production of incendiary objects and explosives in improvised conditions, and the use of drones to transport and detonate explosives. One of the organizers of the training camp in Bosnia and Herzegovina was Mikhail Potepkin, CEO of Meroe Gold and M Invest, front companies for Wagner Group operations in Sudan. The training of Moldovan activists in inciting riots may constitute part of the preparations for the parliamentary elections scheduled to take place in Moldova in the fall of 2025.

4. Selected techniques and tactics of manipulation, linguistic mechanisms of persuasion, actions and psychological effects – identification and analysis.

Introduction

Moldova plays a key role in the Russian Federation's strategic plans to maintain influence in Central and Eastern Europe. Russia employs coordinated psychological operations (PSYOP) that encompass a wide range of manipulative techniques aimed at political destabilization, undermining trust in European Union and NATO integration, and strengthening pro-Russian sentiments within Moldovan society. This report provides a detailed analysis of the techniques,

tactics, and persuasion used, with particular emphasis on themes related to the European Union (EU), NATO, and Moldova's national identity. Russia conducts complex and systematic psychological operations in Moldova that are part of a broader strategy to maintain influence in the Central and Eastern European region. The aim of these activities is to weaken Moldova's pro-Western aspirations, cause political destabilization, and strengthen pro-Russian attitudes in society. The tools for achieving these goals are information manipulation, disinformation, and the exploitation of sensitive social, economic, and geopolitical issues.

Main objectives of psychological operations

Undermining trust in the government of Moldova: Russia portrays the Moldovan government as incompetent, corrupt, and authoritarian. It highlights political, economic, and symbolic missteps, such as the management of the gas crisis or failed projects related to European integration.

Weakening aspirations for integration with the West: Creating the narrative that integration with the EU will bring Moldova more harm than good. These claims focus on alleged negative economic, social, and cultural effects, such as the loss of agricultural land, sovereignty, and traditional values.

Discrediting NATO and military cooperation with the West: The North Atlantic Alliance is presented as an aggressor that wants to drag Moldova into a conflict with Russia, and as a threat to the country's constitutional neutrality.

Exploitation of internal and identity-based conflicts: Russia amplifies regional and ethnic divisions, including by supporting narratives about the marginalization of Gagauzia and Transnistria. The propaganda also focuses on the issue of the "Romanianization" of Moldova, presenting it as an attack on national identity.

Key techniques and tactics

Disinformation and narrative manipulation: Russian persuasion efforts are centrally coordinated and disseminated through various channels such as Telegram, pro-Russian online portals, and

social media. An example is the persuasion that integration with the EU will lead to the dispossession of Moldovan farmers, intended to provoke fear of economic losses.

Exploitation of crises and government mistakes: Russia effectively exploits any political and economic problems, such as the audit of debt owed to Gazprom or the gas crisis, to portray the government as incompetent and dependent on the EU.

Audience segmentation: Narratives are tailored to different social groups: youth are warned about “pro-European indoctrination” in schools, farmers about the loss of land, and residents of autonomous regions about marginalization.

Narratives of Western and NATO decline: Emphasizing internal divisions in the West, e.g., on issues of support for Ukraine or migration policy, aims to weaken faith in the stability and future of the Union. NATO, in turn, is portrayed as a military organization threatening peace and Moldova’s neutrality.

Amplification of fears and social anxieties: Narratives about the construction of migrant camps on Moldovan territory, the militarization of the country by NATO, and the possibility of conflict with Russia are typical examples of actions aimed at generating public unease.

Persuasions related to NATO

Anti-NATO narratives are a key element of Russian propaganda in Moldova. They create an image of the Alliance as an aggressor that seeks to abolish Moldova’s neutrality, drag the country into a conflict with Russia, and enforce the militarization of society. NATO is presented as an organization striving to eliminate Moldova’s constitutional neutrality, which fuels resistance within society. Claims that integration with NATO will provoke Russia into military action against Moldova reinforce fears of war. NATO as a tool of U.S. domination: Russia promotes the persuasion that NATO serves U.S. interests rather than those of its member states, with the goal of weakening support for military cooperation with the Alliance.

Persuasions related to the West

Russia presents the European Union as an organization in crisis, whose actions cause more harm than good:

Division within the EU: Narratives highlight the lack of unity among member states, e.g., on issues of support for Ukraine, suggesting that Moldova cannot rely on stable support from the EU.

Loss of sovereignty and identity: Integration with the EU is portrayed as a threat to Moldova's traditional values, national identity, and political independence.

Economic problems: Russia promotes the persuasion that EU integration will lead to increased poverty, loss of agricultural land, and economic marginalization.

Consequences of psychological operations

Division of society: Russia effectively strengthens existing political, ethnic, and regional divisions, leading to increased internal tensions in Moldova.

Undermining trust in the government and democratic processes: Narratives about "electoral fraud" and the government's authoritarian actions erode citizens' confidence in state institutions.

Delaying integration with the EU and NATO: Creating a negative image of the EU and NATO may discourage citizens from supporting further reforms and integration processes.

Russia conducts large-scale and well-organized psychological operations aimed at destabilizing Moldova, weakening its pro-Western course, and strengthening pro-Russian influence. A key element of these actions are anti-EU and anti-NATO persuasions, which effectively exploit local political, economic, and social problems. Combating Russian propaganda requires a comprehensive approach, encompassing both educational initiatives and strengthening cooperation with international partners.

Techniques of psychological operations used by Russia

- Undermining the credibility of the government: Russia consistently exploits persuasions aimed at discrediting the Moldovan government, portraying it as incompetent, authoritarian, and susceptible to corruption.

- Persuasion about government incompetence: The government is portrayed as incapable of solving economic and social problems. *Example:* The mistake of hanging the EU flag with inverted stars was presented as evidence of the authorities' lack of professionalism. *Example:* Negotiations with Gazprom over debt were described as an example of the government's ineptitude in safeguarding national interests.
- Persuasion about authoritarianism: The government is accused of suppressing freedom of speech and restricting opposition activity. *Example:* The restriction of pro-Russian media activities, such as the closure of television stations critical of the government, was described as "European-style censorship."
- Persuasion about corruption: Authorities are accused of misusing European funds, for instance, allocating them to "bribe local governments."

Exploitation of national identity: Russia consistently leverages identity-related themes in Moldova to deepen social divisions and weaken support for pro-Western reforms. These narratives are well-organized, tailored to local sensitivities, and effectively disseminated through pro-Russian media and local politicians. The exploitation of issues such as language, religion, ethnicity, or unification with Romania constitutes the foundation of Russia's strategy to destabilize the region and obstruct Moldova's integration with the EU and NATO.

Russia uses identity-based themes to reinforce internal divisions within society and undermine support for pro-Western reforms.

Persuasion about "Romanianization": Decisions to promote the Romanian language are portrayed as an attack on Moldovan national identity. Russia consistently exploits the dispute over Moldova's language and national identity, framing European integration as a threat to Moldova's unique culture and identity.

Example: Educational issues, such as promoting "pro-European ideology" in schools, are depicted as an assault on traditional values. Russia exploits Moldovans' strong attachment to Orthodoxy and traditional values in order to present the West and its social policies as a threat to Moldova's Christian identity.

Regional separatisms: Russia portrays Transnistria and Gagauzia as victims of marginalization by the central government. *Example:* The exclusion of Gagauz representatives from the European Integration Commission was described as proof of “Euro-authoritarianism.”

Persuasion about unification with Romania: Integration with the EU is framed as a step toward Moldova’s absorption by Romania, intended to stir fears of losing sovereignty.

Exploitation of economy and energy

Russia intensively exploits economic issues in order to discourage Moldovan society from integrating with the EU and NATO.

- Fear of losing national resources: Claims about the sale of farmland to foreigners as a condition of EU integration. *Example:* Narratives suggesting that “the EU will force Moldova to sell its land to foreigners,” thereby stripping the country of economic independence.
- Energy crises: Emphasis that Moldova pays higher gas prices from the EU than from Russia. *Example:* Propaganda asserts that purchasing gas through EU intermediaries is unprofitable.
- Discrediting exports to the EU: Claims that Moldova does not benefit from trade with the EU. *Example:* Persuasion about “insufficient markets” in the EU compared to Moldova’s historical exports to Russia.

Creating pessimism toward the West and NATO

Russia exploits internal crises in the West and NATO’s actions to strengthen Euroscepticism and undermine trust in Western alliances.

- **The West as a cultural sphere in crisis:** Claims that the West struggles with divisions and is unable to ensure the security of its members. *Example:* Emphasizing rifts within the EU, such as disagreements over support for Ukraine and disputes about migration.

- **Anti-NATO narratives:** The North Atlantic Alliance is portrayed as an aggressor seeking to militarize Moldova. *Example:* Claims that integration with NATO will provoke Russia and drag Moldova into armed conflict. Propaganda states that NATO plans to build military bases on Moldovan territory, stripping it of neutrality.
- **Migrant camps:** False information suggesting that the EU plans to build camps for migrants in candidate countries, including Moldova. *Example:* Persuasion that Moldova will become a “European dumping ground” full of migrants.

Narratives related to NATO

- **NATO as a threat to Moldova’s neutrality:** Russian propaganda exploits Moldova’s constitutional neutrality, portraying NATO as an organization that wants to abolish it. *Example:* Claims that Moldova’s cooperation with NATO is a step toward abandoning neutrality.
- **NATO dragging Moldova into conflict with Russia:** Narratives designed to stoke fears of escalating conflict in the region. *Example:* Claims that cooperation with NATO will provoke Russia into military action against Moldova.
- **NATO as a symbol of Western domination:** The Alliance is portrayed as a tool of the United States to impose its policies. *Example:* Narratives that NATO will increase its military presence in Moldova while ignoring local interests.
- **NATO as a threat to Moldovan society:** Claims that NATO will force Moldovans into militarization and war preparations. *Example:* Narratives about compulsory military training for youth as part of integration with NATO.

Russia conducts complex psychological operations in Moldova, using information manipulation and disinformation to weaken pro-Western public sentiment and block the process of integration with the EU and NATO. Anti-EU and anti-NATO narratives are a central element of these activities, and their effectiveness relies on skillfully instilling fear and distrust.

Linguistic mechanisms in propaganda

Propaganda and disinformation are key tools in the struggle for political and social influence in Moldova. An analysis of the linguistic mechanisms of persuasion used in narratives discrediting Moldova's integration with the European Union reveals sophisticated techniques of manipulation aimed at weakening public support for the country's European course.

Creating an antagonistic divide: “us” versus “them”

One of the most effective propaganda tools is constructing a clear boundary between “us” (the citizens of Moldova, who care about their country) and “them” (external forces seeking to impose their conditions on Moldova). Such narratives rely on emphasizing national distinctiveness and promoting distrust toward foreign influence.

Propaganda portrays the European Union as a force seeking to exploit Moldova, impose its values, and limit its sovereignty. The government and politicians supporting European integration are labeled in this narrative as “traitors” or “collaborators.”

Russia carries out wide-ranging psychological activities aimed at presenting itself as Moldova's key partner and friend, offering an alternative to integration with the European Union and NATO.

Techniques and tactics used by Russia to build a positive image among Moldovans

Russia consistently emphasizes historical and cultural ties with Moldova in order to strengthen its image as a “natural partner” and a “brotherly nation.” It presents itself as the defender of traditional values and Orthodoxy, which resonates with the religious and conservative segment of Moldovan society. Historical events, such as the “liberation” of Moldova by the Red Army during World War II, are presented in propaganda as proof of Russia's long-standing protection over Moldova. A significant role is also played by the financing of Russian cultural centers, the promotion of the Russian language, and the organization of cultural events intended to remind Moldovans of the “civilizational closeness” between Moldova and Russia.

Russia seeks to present itself as Moldova's main trading partner and guarantor of economic stability. Russia promotes itself as a reliable trade partner, offering preferential export conditions for Moldovan products such as wine, fruit, and vegetables. Propaganda emphasizes that the Russian market is more open to Moldovan products than the European Union market. Russia

portrays itself as the key supplier of natural gas to Moldova, promoting the message that cheap Russian resources are a better alternative to the more expensive supplies from the EU. During the energy crisis, Russian propaganda stressed that Moldova was paying higher prices for gas due to its policy of cooperation with the West, while at the same time offering preferential conditions to pro-Russian regions.

Exploitation of shared history and cultural heritage

Russia consistently highlights historical and cultural ties with Moldova in order to reinforce its image as a “natural partner” and a “brotherly nation.”

Narrative of shared heritage: Russia presents itself as the defender of traditional values and Orthodoxy, which resonates with the religious and conservative part of Moldovan society. Historical events, such as the “liberation” of Moldova by the Red Army during World War II, are portrayed in propaganda as proof of Russia’s long-standing guardianship over Moldova.

Cultural support: The financing of Russian cultural centers, the promotion of the Russian language, and the organization of cultural events are aimed at reminding Moldovans of the “civilizational closeness” between Moldova and Russia. Cultural and literary events sponsored by Russia in Gagauzia and Transnistria play a key role in reinforcing this message.

Strengthening the message of “strategic economic partnership”: Russia seeks to portray itself as Moldova’s main trading partner and guarantor of economic stability.

Narratives of economic benefits: Russia promotes itself as a reliable trade partner, offering preferential export conditions for Moldovan products such as wine, fruit, and vegetables. Propaganda emphasizes that the Russian market is more open to Moldovan products than the European Union market.

Ensuring energy stability: Russia presents itself as the key supplier of natural gas to Moldova, promoting the message that cheap Russian resources are a better alternative to the more expensive supplies from the EU. During the energy crisis, Russian propaganda highlighted that Moldova was paying higher prices for gas because of its policy of cooperation with the West, while offering preferential conditions to pro-Russian regions.

Exploitation of religious issues and traditional values: Russia presents itself as a defender of traditional values and morality, setting them against the liberal norms promoted by the West. Russia emphasizes its role as the protector of the Orthodox Church and traditional social norms, which finds particular support in regions such as Gagauzia and Transnistria. Supporting the rebuilding of churches and financing religious events in pro-Russian regions. Russia promotes narratives that integration with the EU threatens the “breakdown of the family,” the legalization of same-sex marriages, and the demoralization of youth. In media campaigns, Russia contrasts the “Christian morality” promoted by Moscow with the “decadence of the West.”

Promoting Russia as a guarantor of peace: Russia presents its presence in the region as a stabilizing factor and as counteracting conflicts. Russia seeks to convince Moldovans that its military presence in Transnistria prevents the escalation of the conflict and guarantees peace in the region. Russian persuasion narratives emphasize that NATO’s actions in Eastern Europe are provocative and may lead to war, whereas Russia maintains peace. Claims that NATO seeks to militarize Moldova and draw it into a conflict with Russia are contrasted with portraying Russia as the “guardian of Moldova’s neutrality.” Russian media present Russia as an opponent of the deployment of NATO troops in the region, which supposedly protects Moldova from an escalation of tensions.

Use of humanitarian assistance and social support: Russia uses material and symbolic aid to build a positive image among Moldovans.

Humanitarian assistance: Russia provides aid in the form of food, medicines, or vaccines (e.g., Sputnik V), especially to pro-Russian regions. Deliveries of Sputnik V vaccines to Gagauzia and Transnistria were widely promoted as an example of Moscow’s care for Moldovans.

Symbolic gestures of solidarity: Events such as providing assistance during crises are presented as proof of Russia’s reliability as a partner. The delivery of Russian food aid during the COVID-19 pandemic to pro-Russian regions.

Supporting pro-Russian political parties in order to strengthen its own persuasion: Russia provides intensive political and financial support to parties and leaders who promote pro-Russian narratives. Ilan Șor’s party receives propaganda support in the Russian media, which strengthens its position as a counterweight to pro-European groups.

Manipulating local media: Russia controls and supports pro-Russian media that propagate a positive image of Russia. Numerous Telegram channels such as “Тараузская Республика” and “Приднестровец” promote narratives about Moldova’s closeness to Russia and its advantages over the West.

Strengthening activities in autonomous regions: Russia concentrates its actions on pro-Russian regions such as Transnistria and Gagauzia in order to strengthen pro-Russian sentiments. Financing infrastructure and social projects in Gagauzia and supporting separatist structures in Transnistria.

Creating an alternative model of integration: Russia promotes the concept of integration with the Eurasian Economic Union as a more advantageous alternative to cooperation with the EU. The message is that membership in a union with Russia will bring economic benefits without the need to implement the “painful reforms” imposed by the EU.

Linguistic techniques:

Contrasting juxtapositions: Emphasizing differences between Moldova’s traditional values and the “foreign” principles of the EU.

Exclusionary pronouns: Use of expressions such as “we,” “our” in opposition to “they,” “their,” which reinforces a sense of community threatened by external forces.

Demonization of the opponent: The government and the EU are described as striving to destroy Moldova’s sovereignty and culture. Examples:

- “The European Union imposes its ideology on us, while Moldova has always been an independent country.”
- “In the name of their European integration, we are losing our schools, our identity, and our sovereignty.”
- “Europe doesn’t want a strong Moldova – it wants a colony.”

Objective: To create a sense of threat and mobilize citizens to resist the government, which in the propaganda narrative is portrayed as serving “foreign” interests rather than those of society.

Irony and ridicule: Sarcasm and irony are effective tools that undermine the seriousness of the opponent and reinforce the message in a light, entertaining form. Narratives ridiculing EU integration or politicians supporting this process increase skepticism about their competence and intentions.

Mechanism description: Ridicule strengthens the emotional impact of the message while reducing the space for substantive debate. Minor incidents are given symbolic significance that supposedly reveals the “true” nature of politicians or integration processes.

Linguistic techniques:

Sarcastic comparisons: Creating absurd analogies, e.g., comparing government policies to occupation activities.

Ironic questions: Highlighting alleged incompetence through rhetorical questions, e.g., “Is this really what we want?”

Trivialization: Reducing serious actions to absurd examples intended to discredit them:

- “The EU flag with inverted stars – a symbol of our government’s professionalism!”
- “Maia Sandu claims she will bring Moldova into the EU by 2030 – perhaps with the help of a time machine.”
- “EU integration means Moldova will become a European country – in theory, but only in theory.”

Objective: To build emotional distance between the audience and the object of criticism, while simultaneously undermining the credibility of the government’s and the EU’s actions.

Instilling fear and uncertainty

Propaganda exploits the human tendency to avoid risk, amplifying fears associated with the uncertain future that EU integration allegedly brings. Narratives are based on creating visions of catastrophic consequences, such as loss of identity, economic bankruptcy, or military involvement in conflicts supposedly resulting from EU membership.

Linguistic techniques:

Exaggerating threats: Creating dramatic images of the future, e.g., “Moldova will become Europe’s dumping ground.”

Appeals to emotion: Using words such as “catastrophe,” “collapse,” “betrayal” to provoke strong emotional reactions.

Hypothetical scenarios: Describing fictional but seemingly plausible events, e.g., “The EU will force the sale of land to foreigners.” Examples:

- “Joining the EU means Moldova will be forced to sell its land to foreign investors, destroying agriculture.”
- “Integration with the EU is the first step toward war – our children will fight on foreign soil.”

Objective: To intimidate society and arouse resistance to change.

Manipulating authorities

Propaganda often uses manipulation of statements by well-known individuals or institutions to reinforce its persuasion. Statements are selectively quoted or taken out of context, and sometimes entirely fabricated.

Mechanism description: Quotes and data allegedly coming from experts or opinion leaders create the impression that negative persuasions are confirmed by recognized authorities.

Linguistic techniques:

Fake quotes: Attributing statements to people that they never made.

Selective data: Presenting facts that support the narrative while ignoring other information.

Creating a false consensus: Creating the impression that a particular view is widely accepted.

Examples:

- “The EU Ambassador admitted that Moldova will not meet accession criteria for another 20 years.”
- “The President of France said that the EU has no future in its current form.”

Objective: To strengthen the credibility of propaganda by pretending to have expert support.

Appealing to traditional values and emotions

Many Moldovans attach great importance to values such as religion, family, or local tradition. Propaganda intensively exploits these elements, portraying the EU as a threat to the foundations of society:

- “Integration with the EU is not only a political betrayal but also a spiritual one.”
- “Romanianization is only the first step toward erasing our identity.”

Technique: Religious and emotional connotations reinforce the message, making it more persuasive to audiences.

Summary

The persuasions employed by the Russian influence apparatus, especially those aimed at Moldova’s integration with the West, use a wide range of linguistic mechanisms of persuasion. By instilling fear, manipulating facts, and appealing to emotions and traditional values, they effectively influence social attitudes. A key element of their effectiveness is the reference to the local context and the everyday problems of citizens, which makes them more impactful. Combating this phenomenon requires not only media education but also active communication from the government and pro-European organizations, which should counter disinformation with reliable and accessible explanations of the processes related to integration.

5. Propaganda, Manipulation, and Disinformation Activities Targeting Perceptions of the West and Democratic Values

In the Moldovan media space, propaganda and disinformation campaigns resonate intensely, aimed at weakening trust in the West and in democratic values. The source of these foreign interferences is Russia, whose actions create the image of the West as an entity destabilizing the region. The European Parliamentary elections, followed by the presidential elections in Moldova and the referendum on its membership in the European Union (EU) in 2024, significantly increased the number of messages focused on the theme of European integration.

a) Externally motivated

Among externally motivated disinformation narratives targeting perceptions of the West and democratic values, the dominant ones included:

1. A narrative discrediting the idea of Moldova's integration with the West:

- integration with the EU will lead Moldova to ruin;
- the EU treats Moldova in a neo-colonial manner;
- the pro-European Moldovan government opposes Russian values;

2. Vectors of the narrative:

- a narrative equating the European Union and NATO with a threat to security;
- a narrative discrediting Western values;
- a narrative spreading the belief in the West's fatigue with the war in Ukraine;
- a narrative about the demonization of Russia by the West;
- a narrative about the hypocrisy of the West;
- a narrative portraying pro-European politicians as puppets of the West.

b) Internally motivated

Among internally motivated disinformation narratives targeting perceptions of the West and democratic values, the dominant ones included:

1) A narrative discrediting the idea of Moldova's integration with the West:

- the Moldovan government is not genuinely pro-European;
- the Moldovan government tries to mask its incompetence through European integration;
- Moldova hides its illegal activities behind rhetoric about integration with the EU;
- the actions of the Moldovan authorities contradict their European aspirations;
- the Moldovan government discredits Moldova's integration with the EU;
- Moldovan society does not support EU accession;
- Moldova is not ready to become part of the EU;

2) A narrative discrediting the referendum on Moldova's accession to the European Union:

- the referendum on Moldova's European integration is an electoral fraud orchestrated by Maia Sandu;
- the referendum on Moldova's European integration was organized in violation of democratic and legal norms;

3) A narrative discrediting the European Union:

- accession to the EU is incompatible with neutrality status;
- accession to the EU means accession to NATO;
- the EU will push Moldova into war;
- the EU is on the verge of collapse;
- the EU imposes foreign values on Moldovans.

c) Examples of activities

Externally motivated disinformation narratives were promoted through exemplary manipulative actions:

1) Narrative discrediting the idea of Moldova's integration with the West:

- Russian propaganda portrays Moldova's integration with the EU as the cause of rising energy prices in Moldova. It forecasts that the situation will drive Moldovans into poverty. The Russian Ambassador in Chișinău, Oleg Ozerov, stated that gas supplies from the EU would destroy Moldova's economy. According to propagandists, another consequence of European integration would be the loss of farmland, which would also contribute to the impoverishment of Moldovan society. Moldovans were also said to lose access to key export markets. This message was reinforced by comparing Moldova's modest exports to the EU with above-average exports to Russia and CIS countries. These efforts boil down to the assumption that **integration with the EU will lead Moldova to ruin;**
- Russian news agencies, such as TASS, disseminated information about plans to build camps for migrants deported from the EU in countries applying for membership in the community, including Moldova. The starting point for constructing this false narrative was an article in the British *The Times*, based not on verified facts but on leaks and conversations within EU circles. In the information space, suggestions appeared that the EU would turn Moldova into a "European dumping ground." Ilan Șor, who obtained Russian citizenship in 2024 and actively supports Russian influence in Moldova, explicitly stated that Maia Sandu would turn the country into a "European garbage dump full of military bases and refugees." Moldovan government spokesman Daniel Vodă called these statements disinformation, emphasizing that Moldova was not holding such talks with the EU. The EU delegation in Chișinău also denied the reports. The goal of the propagandists' actions was not only to stir fear in Moldovan society but also to create the impression that **the EU treats Moldova in a neo-colonial manner.** In the image of events shaped by the Kremlin, the EU – although officially promoting partnership and support – exploits Moldova in a way reminiscent of colonial power relations, but in a modern context. The support the EU is able to provide Moldova is thus portrayed by Russians as a tool of Western state influence. In November 2024, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova stated: "There have been media reports about the EU's plans to allocate over 30 million euros under the EU-Ukraine solidarity corridors project to carry out a thorough renovation of Moldova's railway network to reduce the burden on existing

railway connections with Ukraine. (...) They are doing this to further aggravate the situation in the region.” Zakharova argued that Moldova would be forced to serve as a logistics hub for the Ukrainian armed forces;

- In February 2024, rumors appeared in the media space that officials in separatist Transnistria might seek to hold a referendum on joining Russia to support Russian hybrid operations in politically and socially destabilizing Moldova. Ultimately, Transnistrian deputies issued a vague appeal for Russian “protection against pressure from Moldova,” which received an ambiguous response from Sergey Lavrov. The Russian foreign minister declared that Moldova was obstructing the negotiation process to resolve the Transnistrian issue, in which Ukraine, Russia, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe were to act as mediators, with the United States and the EU as observers. He simultaneously accused Moldova of “blocking everything Russian.” These actions are intended to convince the public that **Moldova’s pro-European government opposes Russian values.**

2) Narrative equating the European Union and NATO with a threat to security, including Moldova’s neutrality:

- Russian propagandists often equate the EU with NATO, claiming that accession to the EU means the loss of neutrality and the country’s involvement in armed conflicts. They present the European community as an intermediary of the Alliance, and the West as a force that compels states to submit to its political-military goals, especially by incorporating them into NATO structures. On the day of Moldova’s 2024 presidential elections, posters and leaflets appeared in Varnita (near separatist Transnistria) with slogans such as: “EU = NATO. By joining the EU, our country will lose neutral status, and Moldovans will die in conflict zones under the NATO flag” or “The European Union means war.” Despite growing support for European integration, Moldovans’ attitude toward NATO remains skeptical, and fear of the Alliance and war constitutes an effective manipulation tool. In August 2024, in a survey commissioned by Watchdog.md, 29.5% of Moldovans declared support for NATO membership. Used as a tool in Kremlin propaganda, RIA.ru wrote about the successive destruction of Chişinău’s ties with Moscow

by Western partners, citing a representative of the pro-Russian “Pobieda” bloc: “It is obvious that it all started with one goal – to drag us into NATO, and today everything is being done (...) to destroy our historical ties and strategically important partnership with Russia and the Eurasian Economic Union. Solely for the globalist ambitions of Washington and Brussels.”

3) Narrative discrediting Western values:

- Russia promotes itself as the defender of traditional values, opposing the progressive values of the West. Drawing on conservative, national, and religious slogans, it offers an alternative to the liberal Western model which – according to the Russian Orthodox Church – leads to the collapse of traditional families and the moral foundations of society. The West is portrayed as standing against traditional values. This message is reflected in Moldovan branches of Russian media, which disseminate content targeting the LGBT+ community. Pride marches are reported in an offensive and stigmatizing way, and closer ties with the EU are equated with enforced acceptance and overzealous promotion of LGBT+. Propagandists present the community’s ideology as a threat to Christian values and link its representatives with immorality and deviant behavior. In November 2024, Maria Zakharova commented on the report of the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance of November 12, 2024, which recommended that Moldova expand the LGBT+ agenda. She expressed the belief that “the Moldovan authorities will have no scruples about implementing this program, destructive for Moldovan society.” In the same statement, Zakharova responded to accusations by Moldova’s foreign minister regarding Russia’s promotion among Moldovans of the belief that they will never become part of Europe. “Aggressive efforts to impose the neoliberal agenda on Moldova are in full swing (...), while about 80% of Moldova’s population adheres to traditional values,” the spokeswoman declared.

4) Narrative spreading the belief in the West’s fatigue with the war in Ukraine:

- Russia promotes in Moldova the view that European and American financial aid, as well as arms supplies, are offered to Ukraine unnecessarily. RIA.ru reports that, in Russia’s assessment, these actions disrupt settlement, directly involving NATO countries in the

conflict. To bolster the credibility of this narrative, Russian media use out-of-context statements by pro-Western politicians, including Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk. Propagandists simultaneously emphasize the economic and energy consequences of sanctions against Russia for Europeans and build a negative image of Ukrainian refugees. Immigration is exploited as a theme polarizing societies.

5) Narrative about the demonization of Russia by the West:

- In November 2024, the foreign ministers of six Western countries – Poland, the United Kingdom, Germany, Spain, Italy, and France – accused Russia of intensifying hybrid attacks on NATO and the EU. Responding to the accusations, Maria Zakharova stated: “The European establishment needs the argument of mythical Russian ‘hybrid activities’ to explain its own criminal mistakes that have led to a socio-economic crisis and undermined living standards in Europe.” Zakharova argued that Western countries are conducting a fierce propaganda campaign to demonize Russia. They use arguments about the “Russian threat” to justify the accelerated militarization of Europe and increased defense spending. According to Zakharova, these countries are not acting in the interest of their own defense industry but in the interest of the United States.

6) Narrative about Western hypocrisy:

- Russian propaganda often portrays Western democracy as a façade, having nothing to do with genuine democratic values. In December 2024, after the death of Russian General Igor Kirillov, Russian propaganda sources suggested that: “The terrorist attack in Moscow was the continuation and development of the spiral of acceptance by the West of the war crimes of fighters of the Kyiv regime, which they have been promoting all these years.” Western states are accused of supporting authoritarian regimes, waging wars, violating human rights, and interfering in the internal affairs of other countries. Maria Zakharova, as examples of Western leaders’ hypocrisy, mentioned Boris Johnson, who “used to express his alleged love for Russia, noting that he adored it, and even quoting Russian classics.” At the same time, Zakharova accused Johnson that: “Later he did everything possible to escalate the situation in the conflict zone in Ukraine.” She also recalled contradictory statements and actions of Emmanuel Macron, as well as those of other American

politicians who “(...) said they loved the people of Russia, who send them greetings on holidays every year (...). Then they supplied weapons deployed against that nation (...) and stirred up conflicts between fraternal nations.” This narrative also includes accusations against the West of aggressive policies involving the escalation of international tensions.

7) Narrative portraying pro-European politicians as puppets of the West:

- Russian propaganda delegitimizes pro-European governments, which are said to act in the interests of foreign powers. Asked by a journalist whether former politicians promoting anti-Russian narratives in the Western media landscape “work on orders from the USA,” Maria Zakharova replied: “Do you mean Western politicians? They are all connected with various lobbying groups and PR agencies. In addition, they have the concept of ‘revolving doors’ in politics. In this case, revolving doors refer to employment policy, which is guided by the personal loyalty of the candidate, not their (...) competence. We see this in the United States all the time. This is normal for them, because they are tied to lobbying groups (...); they do not act as objective observers. In fact, they are ‘monstrous propagandists’ (...), promoting the one and only Russophobic idea.” In October 2023, Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Chernyshenko, referring to sanctions against Russia introduced in sport by international organizations and the West, directly called the countries opposing Russia “puppets.” According to Dmitry Medvedev, the West, as part of soft power, uses a network of non-governmental organizations controlled by American and European intelligence services to govern Ukraine.

Internally motivated disinformation narratives were promoted through illustrative manipulative actions

1) Narrative discrediting the idea of Moldova’s integration with the West:

- When in July 2024 a Turkish citizen was killed in Rîșcani, an administrative district of Chișinău, propaganda sources used the crime to promote sarcastic claims about the return of the 1990s to Maia Sandu’s European capital, where murderers roam the streets and the authorities fight the opposition. Propagandist Marina Tauber reduced the incident to the category of broad-daylight killings, arguing that such acts are unacceptable in

a country with European aspirations. The instrumental use of the crime fit into the promotion of the thesis that **the Moldovan government is not in practice pro-European.**

- The crime was also referred to on the Mamałyga and Tokana (Мамалыга и Токана) channels and by Bogdan Țirdea, suggesting that on the streets of Chișinău “people are being shot” while the president discusses plans for European integration, army modernization, and engages with the war in Ukraine. Identical content was promoted by the WTF Moldova channel, where, referring to the promotion of European integration by the Party of Action and Solidarity (Partidul Acțiune și Solidaritate – PAS), it was written: “Lack of security (an armed criminal running through the city); impoverishment of the population; disastrous emigration; no prospects for young people (closing educational institutions); inaccessible medicines – such are the real consequences of this government’s rule.”
- In another post, Țirdea sarcastically emphasized that Maia Sandu buys the most expensive gas in Europe, and in another that in Moldova the EU flag is insistently displayed while “in the village of Mihălaș in the Telenești district there is no post office, no doctors, and no transport.” Meanwhile, in December 2023, Gagauzinfo.md highlighted the mistake of PAS deputies, who during the playing of the anthem in the Moldovan parliament held the EU flag “upside down.” A similar mistake occurred in 2024, when on the occasion of Independence Day celebrations at Chișinău’s Great National Assembly Square the EU flag was hung with inverted stars. The incident became the subject of ridicule by propagandists.
- At the end of 2024, the results of the Moldovagaz audit were also used for Russian disinformation attacks, including the transfer of gas network management to Vestmoldtransgaz, owned by Romania’s Transgaz and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). The decision was interpreted as handing over the country’s sovereignty to the EBRD and Romania. The information was presented selectively, without reference to the questionable validity of the debts to Gazprom or the legality of the audit itself. The audit was portrayed as a desperate maneuver by the

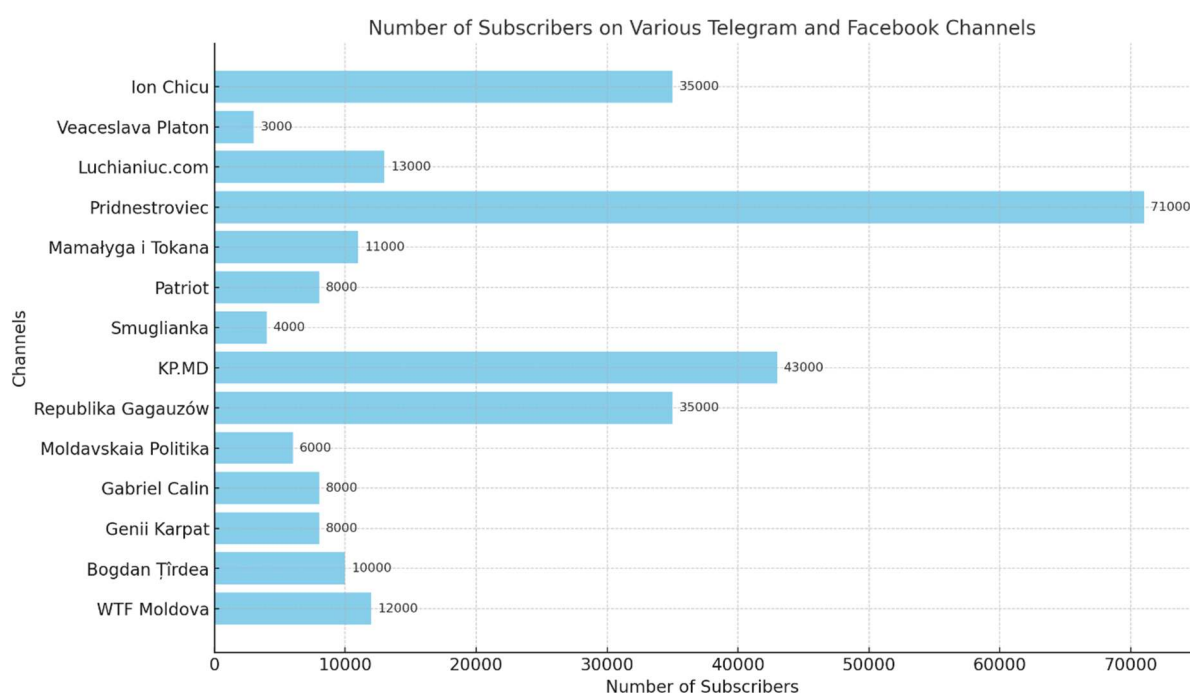
government lacking sufficient financial resources, or as an attempt by the authorities to obtain greater foreign support. Media also mentioned the risks associated with gas storage in Ukraine, as well as a new loan granted by the EBRD for gas purchases. The meeting of Moldovan Energy Minister Victor Parlicov with Gazprom CEO Alexey Miller in November 2024 in St. Petersburg also became the object of mockery. The purpose of the visit was to discuss issues related to gas supplies to Moldova, especially to Transnistria, after January 1, 2025, when the transit agreement through Ukraine expires. The discussion also covered Moldovagaz's debt to Gazprom and candidates for the new Board of Directors of Moldovagaz. Propagandists mocked the visit, claiming that Moldova was entering a new gas crisis, for which the incompetent government was to blame. The aim of these maneuvers was to present alleged **incompetence that the Moldovan government sought to mask through European integration.**

- In many sources, accusations were made against PAS of using power to commit crimes. Luchianiuc.com and WTF Moldova repeated Ion Ceban's speculations regarding the "European Village" program as a tool to blackmail mayors; Alexandr Stoianoglo described European integration as a "club" used by those in power; Corneliu Ciurea claimed that the purpose of mail-in voting was election fraud, while accusing the authorities of planning to remove "all inconvenient candidates" from the electoral race. On the WTF Moldova channel, EU Commissioner for Neighborhood and Enlargement Olivér Várhelyi was accused of "turning a blind eye" to Moldova's violations of democratic principles and values. Propaganda sources also criticized the code of organization and functioning of the Moldovan parliament, particularly the rule requiring legislation to be drafted exclusively in Romanian. Genii Karpát sarcastically summed up the situation with the words: "Moldova, Europe, human rights, respect for all. But not for Russian speakers." Maria Zakharova also wrote about derussification, arguing that a protest movement was developing in Moldova and that the authorities' actions were pushing citizens to consolidate in order to preserve the country's sovereignty and national identity. Published posts consistently fit into the thesis that **Moldova hides its illegal activity behind rhetoric about integration with the EU.**

- In July 2024, deputies of the Gagauzia People's Assembly claimed that the central authorities were persecuting people who visited Russia, thus the **actions of Moldovan authorities contradicted their European aspirations**. The absence of PAS deputies at the Equality March in Chişinău a month earlier was interpreted in propaganda media as an anti-European act.
- Propaganda sources sought to downplay Maia Sandu's chances of winning the presidential election. On the Patriot, Gabriel Calin, and Genii Karpas accounts, it was emphasized that the true candidate of pro-European forces would be activist Maria Olari. On WTF Moldova, PAS was accused of lying about the country's European future, peace, and democracy, while according to Ion Chicu, the authorities undermined the credibility and value of everything they undertook. Posts of similar content thus promoted the thesis that the **Moldovan government discredits Moldova's integration with the EU**.
- On social media, suggestions appeared that hatred for the pro-European PAS was so great that citizens were ready to vote for any candidate supported by the Kremlin. According to the style of the posts, Moldovans in reality do not support the European path. On the Patriot channel it was mocked that only 360 citizens joined the "Citizens for Europe" initiative. In another post, the goal of its launch was said to be merely to maintain power and make money. Cristina Gherasimov's words that "failure of the referendum will be a missed opportunity for Moldova" were interpreted as an attempt to persuade Moldovans to vote the way "Sandu and her entourage" wanted. Alexei Lungu insinuated that the amendments to the Criminal Code of June 2024 were intended to punish those opposing European integration. Genii Karpas speculated, based on statistics, that Moldovans emigrate because they do not believe in the success of European integration. The WTF Moldova channel also saw pro-government propaganda in a series of documentaries about athletes representing the country at the XXXIII Summer Olympic Games in Paris. The propaganda sources' message thus fit into the thesis of **a lack of Moldovans' social support for EU accession**.
- Numerous posts amounted to suggestions that **Moldova is not ready to become part of the EU**. In this context, comparisons were used for manipulation. Ilan Şor ranked Moldova

third in terms of debt to the International Monetary Fund, while at the same time calling the country “the poorest in Europe.” On the WTF Moldova channel, the example of Lithuania was shared (“The Central Bank of Lithuania calculated that Lithuanians will have to wait another 13 years to reach the standard of living of wealthy Europeans”). Both this channel and Genii Karpāt spread Dorin Chirtoacă’s words about the lack of functional democratic structures and fundamental reforms to meet EU accession requirements over the past three decades. Moldovan WatchDog also cited suggestions from the political bloc “Pobiedan” that European partners perceived in Moldova a “high level of corruption.” On the Moldova Politics channel, it was argued, for example, that the country is a corridor for European drug trafficking. Propagandists further suggested that “Moldova is becoming a graveyard for old cars” and lacks import standards for them, as well as being among the top European countries in terms of prisoners per 100,000 inhabitants. “It seems that the European Union appreciated this achievement by granting Moldova candidate status for accession to the organization, and Maia Sandu a series of medals and awards for ‘strengthening democracy,’” they mocked.

- The most active promoters of this narrative on Telegram included the following channels: WTF Moldova (approx. 12,000 subscribers), Bogdan Țîrdea (approx. 10,000 subscribers), Genii Karpāt (approx. 8,000 subscribers), Gabriel Calin (approx. 8,000 subscribers), Moldavskaia Politika (approx. 6,000 subscribers), Republic of Gagauzia (approx. 35,000 subscribers), KP.MD (approx. 43,000 subscribers), Smuglianka (approx. 4,000 subscribers), Patriot (approx. 8,000 subscribers). Content with the same tone was also posted on, among others, Mamałyga and Tokana (approx. 11,000 subscribers), Pridnestrovec (approx. 71,000 posubscribers), Luchianiuc.com (approx. 13,000 subscribers), as well as on Veaceslav Platon’s channel (approx. 3,000 subscribers). On Facebook, the issue was raised by Ion Chicu (approx. 35,000 followers).



2) Narrative discrediting the referendum on Moldova's accession to the European Union

- The most popular thesis within the promotion of this narrative was the assumption that **the referendum on Moldova's European integration was Maia Sandu's electoral fraud** (i.e., a vote "for" European integration in fact constituted a vote "for" Maia Sandu). The reach of the message was amplified by a statement from the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (Partidul Socialiștilor din Republica Moldova – PSRM), which pushed the view that "(...) organizing a pro-European referendum on the same day as the presidential election of the Republic of Moldova fits into Maia Sandu's electoral campaign, as she wants to personally tie herself to the EU and attract to her side people who clearly do not trust her, but are favorable toward European integration. The referendum is a deceptive maneuver; in reality it is a political technology aimed at manipulating voters and mobilizing additional votes for PAS's protégé." The Socialists openly called for a boycott of the referendum. This decision was supported by the political bloc "Pobedan," which considered the integration referendum as "Sandu's referendum." Former Prime Minister Ion Chicu suggested that the referendum decision was the result of Sandu's desperation, while former Economy Minister Alexandr Muravschi saw the referendum's purpose as securing Sandu's second term.

- A feeding ground for the promotion of this narrative was a statement from the Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova (PCRM), in which the ruling authorities were accused of using administrative resources, such as changing the electoral code, for their own benefit, and citizens were called to vote against Moldova's accession to the EU. It called for categorical opposition to the alleged illegality and fraud of the Moldovan authorities, as well as to attempts to profane the Moldovan Constitution with absurd amendments. PCRM's position was later promoted by Bogdan Țîrdea. The Moldova Politics channel argued that Moldovans would support changing the Constitution without understanding what exactly was being changed. Marina Tauber announced that the United States and the EU would offer Moldova grants to promote the referendum, which would be in violation of the Electoral Code. Igor Dodon also argued that the referendum was illegal, dangerous, and unconstitutional, since any provision adopted in the EU could become binding on Moldova. These activities fit into the thesis that **the referendum was organized in violation of democratic and legal norms.**

3) Narratives discrediting the European Union

- Propaganda sources tried to convince audiences that **accession to the EU was contrary to the status of neutrality**. "Mail-in voting 'cuts off' a significant part of the diaspora in Russia (...). The referendum is essentially a fraud. (...) the authorities will be able to use the support of a small part of society to justify any changes to the constitution: abandoning neutrality, joining NATO, hosting foreign bases, participating in conflict with Russia, depriving Moldovan farmers of preferences, agreeing to accept in the country all migrants to the EU, a 'green light' for LGBT ideology, etc.," was written on the Moldova Politics channel. At another time, the channel quoted Alexandru Stoianoglo explaining the reasons for his decision to run for president: "(...) the government is turning neutral Moldova into a 'battlefield.' European Moldova must be neutral," emphasized the former prosecutor general.
- The previously cited post published on the Moldova Politics channel included the thesis propagated by propagandists that **accession to the EU means accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)**. On Telegram, it was suggested that in the

referendum, citizens were voting not so much for European integration, but for changing the constitution, giving PAS the possibility to potentially annul the country's neutrality in favor of joining NATO. The Pridnestrovets and WTF Moldova channels directly link the process of European integration with the necessity of NATO membership. Moldovan WatchDog also quoted Maria Zakharova's words suggesting that European integration was an attempt to take over Moldova by NATO. In July 2024, Zakharova emphasized the need for "consolidation in order to preserve the sovereignty and national identity of the country, to defend the right to call ourselves Moldovans (...)", adding that Russia had always advocated for an equal and respectful dialogue with Moldova.

- The most popular thesis among propagandists in this narrative area was the assumption that **the EU would push Moldova into war**. This thesis was often based on the conviction that accession to NATO would be a consequence of European integration. According to Ilan Șor, Moldovan authorities were ready to send the country's citizens to someone else's war, turning them into human shields for NATO's army. Moldova Politics considered the "trumpeting about the readiness to send Moldovans into the fire of someone else's war" as "the highest level of cynicism of the Sandu regime." On the Republic of Gagauzia channel in July 2024, it was announced that Moldova would become a logistics hub between the EU and Ukraine, used to deliver weapons and deploy military contingents. "We are being dragged into the armed conflict in Ukraine (...). Previously unrelated events now seem to be forming one 'ominous' puzzle of fate prepared for us by NATO in the context of its geopolitical confrontation with Russia." It was taken as obvious that Moldovan soldiers were preparing to provide ground cover for the landing of NATO units on Moldovan territory. In the background, references were made to the transformation of the Mărculești International Airport into a "jump airfield" for Ukrainian F-16s, the Moldovan prime minister's expressed readiness to modernize transport infrastructure to support logistics between the EU and Kyiv, and the honing of combat skills of Moldovan police in urban conditions under the supervision of an American airborne brigade. A post on the Smuglianka channel focused on similar content: "Foreign mercenaries and military cargo on Moldovan territory have become the norm. NATO's militarization of the republic creates the sense that the country is being prepared for a possible armed conflict. Along

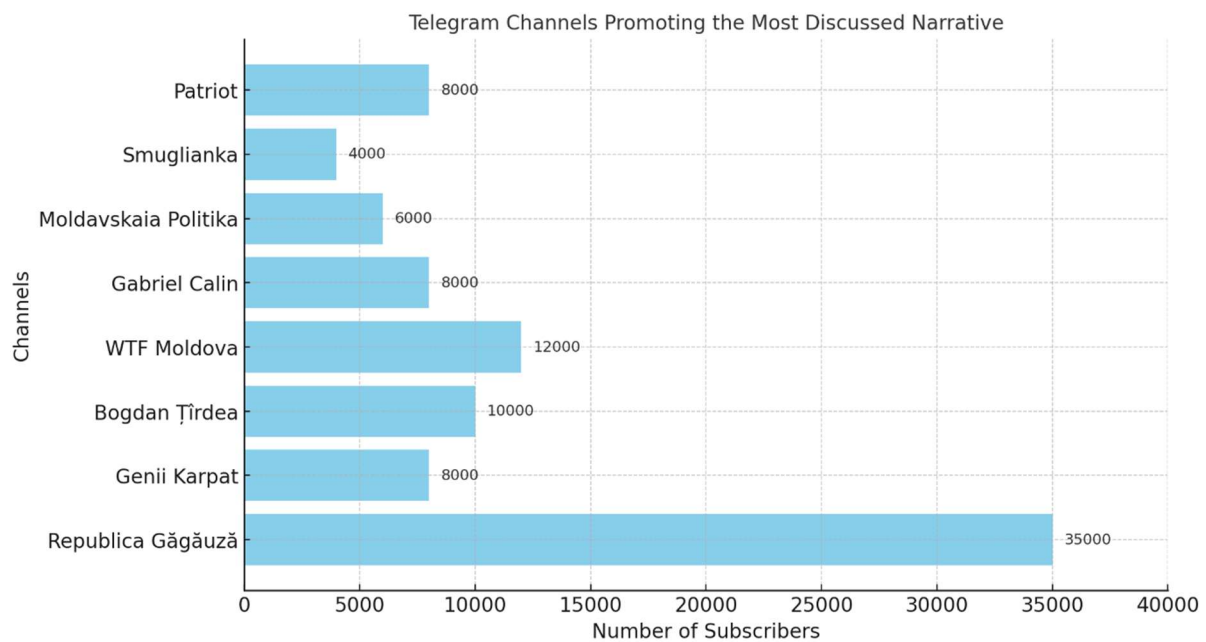
the border with Transnistria, drones are flying (...), heavy weapons movements have been observed, and military exercises are taking place near the security zone. Moreover, the Bulboaca training ground is being modernized, a military base is being built in Bacioi, and the Mărculești military airport is also being modernized.” The post explicitly assessed that the conditions for Moldova’s involvement in war with Russia would be paved by a positive result in the referendum on European integration: “The presidential election in Moldova is not about being for or against European integration. It is an election that will decide whether Moldova will be dragged into war or not.” This time, propagandists based their manipulative message on inciting fear. On the WTF Moldova channel, the narrative was made more attractive through the use of deepfake technology with Maia Sandu’s image. As the fake Sandu declared: “If you want peace, prepare for war. Only I don’t want peace at all; I immediately prepare for war. During war, you won’t have time to think about utilities, roads, and living standards. I think this is brilliant. No complaints, no problems.” From the fabricated recording it followed that the EU intended to purchase anti-aircraft missile systems for Moldova. A post on the Moldova Politics channel also referred to the sending of Moldovan military personnel to participate in an EU operation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, pushing the view that the EU needed Moldovans as “cannon fodder.”

- Propagandists attempt to create the impression that **the EU is on the verge of collapse**. Doru Petruti argued that the union of European states is struggling with many internal problems, including declining trust in institutions and deteriorating living standards. According to WTF Moldova, 94.6 million people in the EU experience material or social deprivation and have low incomes insufficient to sustain themselves. According to Corneliu Ciurea, Germany and France will leave the EU in the coming years, as evidenced by the rise of euroscepticism visible in the results of the European Parliament elections. Igor Dodon, meanwhile, announced that the EU was facing a fundamental reform.
- The narrative was also reinforced by the thesis that **the EU imposes foreign values on Moldovans**. According to monitoring by Moldovan WatchDog, the Șor Party linked European integration with “suppressing national identity and imposing a non-traditional cultural code,” while Igor Dodon considered it unjustified to sacrifice national heritage and identity for the sake of EU accession. The LGBT theme was also used to propagate this

assumption, with a pejorative undertone. On the WTF Moldova channel, it was suggested that the Equality March could not take place without the EU flag. The words of Irina Lozovan about EU financing of the LGBT movement in Moldova were also spread. “In Moldova today it is difficult to be a thinking person, especially if one is in opposition. But being an LGBT activist is very easy,” Lozovan commented. Igor Dodon suggested that “LGBT propaganda” was foreign to Moldova as a country of traditional values, and in an interview with RIA Novosti explained why Russia was closer to Moldova than the EU and rejected a Europe in which one must decide whether one is “he, she, or it.”

- In 2024, accusations of destroying Moldovans’ ethnic identity were also fueled by Romanian Language Day (August 31) and the beginning of the school year (September 1), but the popularity of these topics was not long-lasting. In the context of Romanian Language Day, propagandists wrote about the alleged erasure of Moldovan national identity through the use of the Romanian language. It was suggested that the EU “encourages” such actions. The mayor of Chişinău, Ion Ceban, and former Gagauzia governor Irina Vlah were criticized for supporting the Romanian language. In the context of September 1, Sandu was accused of closing schools, contrasted with Russia’s building of schools in Kyrgyzstan. Similar issues were also raised in posts about students from the right bank of the Prut, who were supposedly “indoctrinated” with pro-European ideology, in contrast to students from Transnistria, who were said to be focusing instead on developing physical abilities.

The most actively discussed narrative was promoted on Telegram by the following sources: Republic of Gagauzia (approx. 35,000 subscribers), Genii Karpat (approx. 8,000), Bogdan Țîrdea (approx. 10,000), WTF Moldova (approx. 12,000), Gabriel Calin (approx. 8,000), Moldova Politics (approx. 6,000), Smuglianka (approx. 4,000), Patriot (approx. 8,000)



6. Propaganda, manipulation, and disinformation activities targeting the perception of Poland

In Moldova, most manipulation and disinformation activities targeting the perception of Poland are externally motivated. Their sources are most often Russian internet portals as well as Telegram and Facebook accounts. Although the theme of Poland appears only fragmentarily in the Moldovan media space, it is usually mentioned in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war.

The reach of propaganda, manipulation, and disinformation activities directed against Poland is greater in regions dominated by pro-Russian narratives, such as Gagauzia and Transnistria. In the identified narratives, Poland appears as a country that treats Moldova instrumentally, manipulates it, undermines its neutrality, and at the same time escalates tensions with Russia. The activity of Polish authorities is mentioned, among other things, in the context of the country's membership in Western structures. They are attributed not only subordination to Western interests but also Russophobia, which is intended to create the image of Poland as a destabilizing element in the region. Narratives directed against Poland are clearly marked by anti-Western and anti-NATO rhetoric. The framing of Poland as a tool of the West for interfering in the affairs of post-Soviet states stems from messages promoted by pro-Russian forces that seek to discredit Western actions in the region.

a) Externally motivated

Among the externally motivated disinformation narratives targeting the perception of Poland, the dominant ones included:

- Poland undertakes activities destabilizing Eastern states;
- Poland wants to send illegal migrants to Moldova;
- Poland is a tool of the West;
- Poland wants to fight against Russia in Moldova;
- Poland is the “hyena of Europe”;
- Tensions between Poland and Ukraine will deepen;
- Poland pursues a Russophobic policy;
- Poland spreads disinformation.

b) Internally motivated

Among the internally motivated disinformation narratives targeting the perception of Poland, the dominant ones included:

- Poland increases the risk of dragging Moldova into the geopolitical conflict between the West and Russia;
- Poland is a tool of the United States and NATO;
- Poland actively participates in the destabilization of the region;
- Poland promotes Russophobia;
- Poland promotes nationalism.

c) Examples of activities

Externally motivated disinformation narratives were promoted through the following manipulative actions:

1) Poland undertakes activities destabilizing Eastern states:

- In December 2024, Russian (including *Gagauznews* and *WTF Moldova* on Telegram) and Belarusian media (including the TV station *Belarus-1*, as well as the websites of *Gazeta*

Swislacka, *Belta*, and *EurAsia Daily*) reported that Polish intelligence services had allegedly attempted to recruit a Belarusian diplomat in Chişinău. The pretext for the conversation was supposedly a mention of a “gift” left in a hotel room. According to the media, the “gift” consisted of €100,000 offered in exchange for working for Polish intelligence. The narrative was supposedly supported by audio and video recordings, although it is difficult to assess the circumstances in which the material was created. According to the propagated narrative, Polish intelligence services suffered defeat at the hands of Belarusian counterintelligence, and the attempted recruitment was presented as an effort to distract from their own failures. It is worth noting that shortly before these reports were published, *Belarus-1* aired a film entitled “*Belarusian KGB Counterintelligence Against Polish Special Services*.” The material announced that Belarus planned to exchange foreign citizens imprisoned for espionage for Belarusian citizens jailed abroad. No independent media or official Polish sources confirmed these reports. The Belarusian KGB, however, has repeatedly staged provocations against Polish diplomats.

2) Poland wants to send illegal migrants to Moldova:

- Through fake Facebook accounts, pro-Russian Telegram channels (including *Молдавский Вагон*, *WTF Mołdawia?!*, *Гражданин*, and *Pridnestrovec*), and the Moldovan edition of the Russian newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, in April 2024 information was spread that Poland intended to send illegal migrants from Africa and the Middle East to Moldova. The narrative was allegedly made more credible by references in posts to resources from the Polish news agency. Moldovan authorities denied the fabrication. In Moldova, fearmongering using the migration theme could also be observed on the eve of the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections, when Russian media warned that Maia Sandu, if elected, would bring tens of thousands of refugees into the country.

3) Poland is a tool of the West:

- Content exploiting the migration theme was also used for another purpose – to promote the thesis that the West, through Poland, was escalating tensions in the region. On Telegram, the channel *Eurasian Moldova* spread disinformation that the United States

wanted to start a war with the help of Poland, the Baltic states, and Ukraine, by instrumentalizing the migration crisis on the Belarus-EU border. The post quoted Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko: *“They are trying to use these poor refugees, this process. They already openly say: involve NATO? Start a war. They are provoking us. (...) Europe doesn’t want war. Who needs this war? The Americans.”* Lukashenko described the Americans as those who *“love to fight with someone else’s hands.”* *“They will watch from the sidelines and supply weapons so that we kill each other, and the economy collapses. Then they will come back again with the dollar they are now printing, to ‘help us,’ and America will dominate again. (...) They want to do this through the hands of the Poles, the Balts, and the Ukrainians,”* he argued. This narrative was also repeated by pro-Russian Gagauz media. The anti-EU narrative was promoted, among others, by the fugitive oligarch Ilan Șor: *“Sandu is pushing us towards such a European Union. We are for them a ‘third country,’ so they don’t need companions storming Europe, they will send them for integration somewhere near Chișinău. Perhaps if we are ever accepted into the EU (which is unlikely), it will only be as receivers of ‘waste.’ A new, beautiful world in a fascist style.”*

- In December 2024, *Sputnik Moldova*, the Moldovan branch of the Russian news agency, cited an *RIA Novosti* interview with Sergei Lebedev, a figure linked to pro-Russian activities in Mykolaiv, Ukraine. In it, Lebedev argued that NATO was massively transferring military equipment to Poland. *“Weapons and equipment are flowing into Poland at the same pace as before a major war. They are arming the Poles much more heavily than they armed the Ukrainians before the northern military district,”* he said suggestively.

4) Poland wants to fight Russia in Moldova:

- The starting point for constructing this narrative was an article published in 2021 in the Polish edition of *Biznes Alert*. The author of the text, Wojciech Jakubik, suggested that gas constitutes a Russian instrument of influence over Moldova, and that reducing the extent of Russian influence requires the EU to carry out a “preemptive strike.” *“Not with tanks, but with politics, law, and finance (...). If we provide assistance to Chișinău, we will*

eliminate another point of destabilization on the map of Europe,” Jakubik wrote. The material was then replicated in pro-Russian media, accompanied by stylistics pointing to Poland’s allegedly aggressive policy aimed at destabilizing the situation in Eastern Europe.

5) Poland as the “hyena of Europe”:

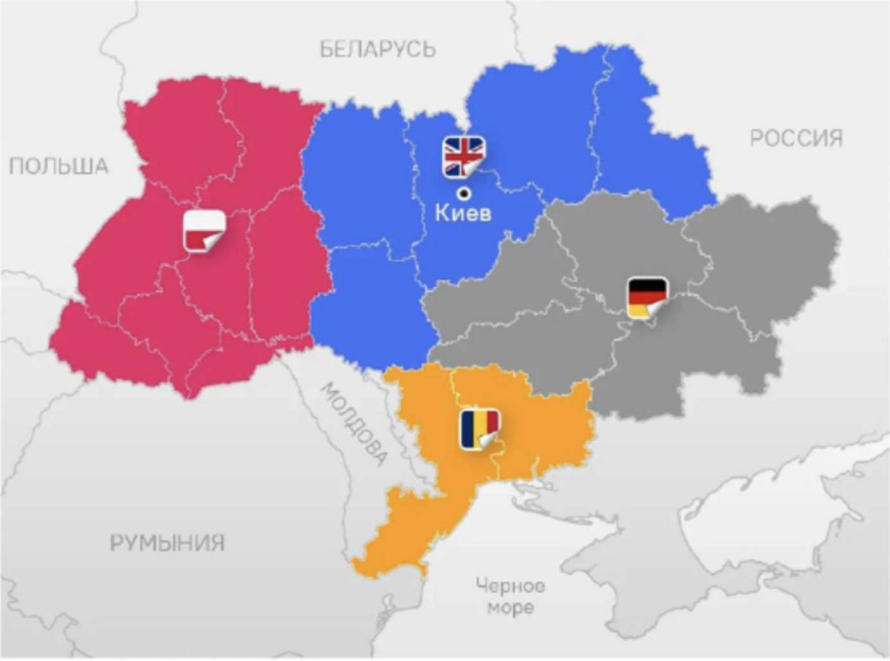
- This narrative boils down to the claim that Poland – driven by its imperial ambitions – wants, under the cover of NATO, to seize Lviv and the former Eastern Borderlands. This can also be illustrated with content from *Sputnik Near Abroad* and *Sputnik Moldova*, which I include below:

5.0K edited 16.06

SM Sputnik Moldova 🇲🇩
Forwarded from Sputnik Near Abroad

Примерная схема оккупации Украины по плану НАТО

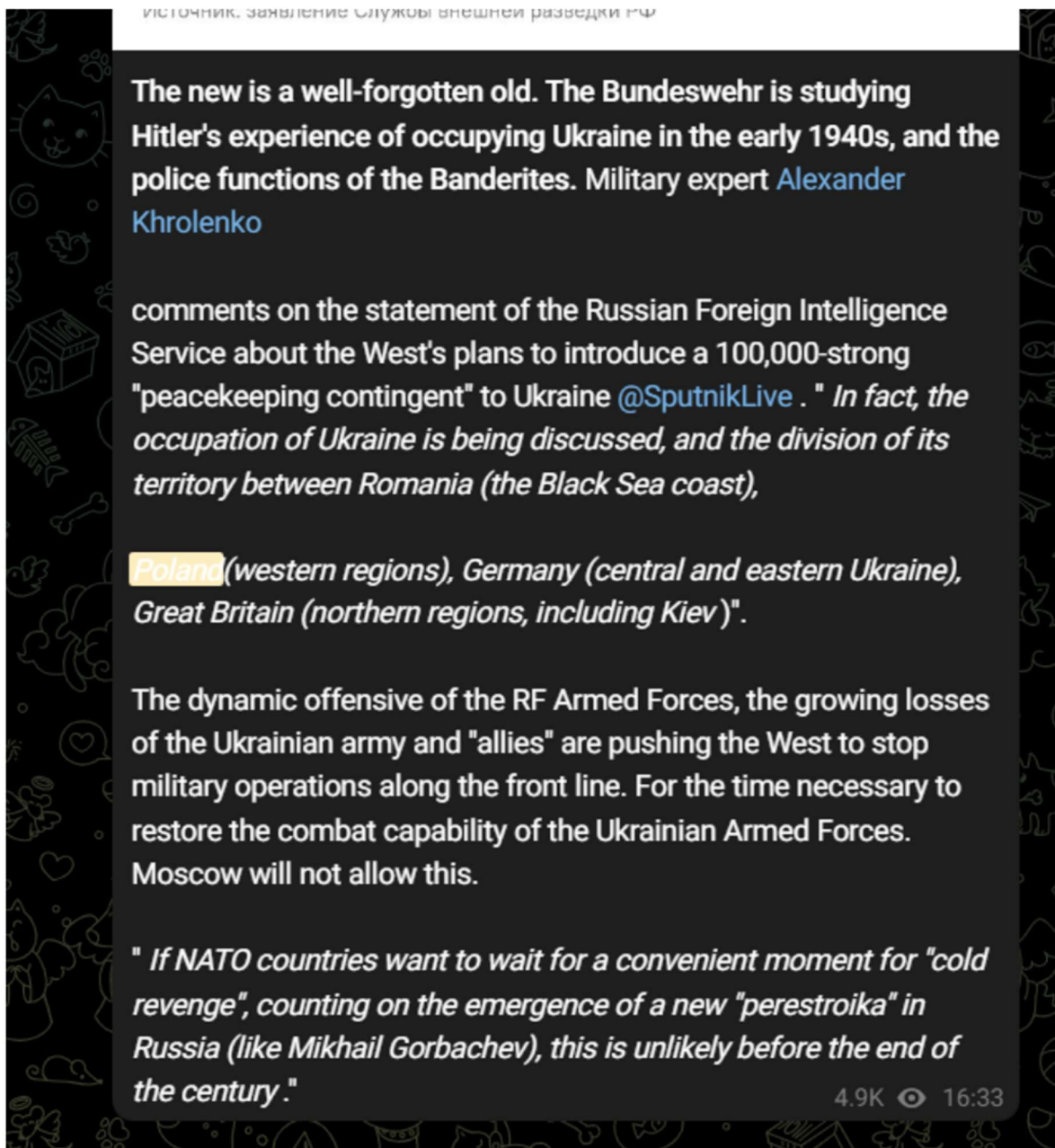
🇵🇱 Польша 🇬🇧 Великобритания 🇷🇺 Румыния 🇩🇪 Германия



БЕЛАРУСЬ
ПОЛЬША
КИЕВ
РОССИЯ
МОЛДОВА
РУМЫНИЯ
Черное море

Источник: заявление Службы внешней разведки РФ

The new is a well-forgotten old. The Bundeswehr is studying Hitler's experience of occupying Ukraine in the early 1940s, and the police functions of the Banderites. Military expert [Alexander](#)



It intensified, among other things, in 2022 after the delegation of Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki and Deputy Prime Minister Jarosław Kaczyński, along with the prime ministers of the Czech Republic and Slovenia, traveled to Kyiv, and also after Kaczyński proposed sending a NATO peacekeeping mission to Ukraine. Sergey Lavrov spoke on this issue several times, while the portal *Pravda.ru* suggested that “Poland, as the ‘hyena of Europe,’ is driving towards World War III.” One Russian publicist even proposed to “hit the ‘hyena of Europe’ with nuclear weapons.” “Officially, Poland does not lay claims to Russian lands, but unofficially the appetites of the Poles are only growing. (...) The ‘hyena of Europe’ is impatiently awaiting revenge, because it was

Russia, in their opinion, that prevented the Poles from remaining an empire 'from sea to sea' – from the Baltic to the Black Sea," reported *Gagauznews.com*, citing *Life.ru*. The portal referenced in this context the words of Sergey Markov, an international relations expert belonging to the circle of Vladimir Putin's advisers, who in 2020 openly criticized many false theses about Poland repeated in the Russian information space. However, in 2022 Markov – according to *Life.ru* – “believes that the appetites of the Polish lords are enormous – they encompass the entire Baltic States, Ukraine, Belarus, and five Russian regions: Voronezh, Kursk, Belgorod, Rostov, and Kuban.” Alleged Polish plans, according to Markov, are said to be coordinated with the United States and the United Kingdom.

- On Telegram in October 2023, Ivan Voit, a political scientist and historian from Transnistrian State University, was quoted mentioning Poland in the context of imperial states. *“Transnistria was part of Kievan Rus, the Galicia-Volhynia Rus, the Russo-Lithuanian state, Poland, the Crimean Khanate, the Ottoman Empire, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. It passed from hand to hand and was torn between hostile states,”* Voit said, adding that stability in the region came at the end of the 18th century, when the territory of today's Transnistria became part of the Russian Empire.
- This narrative also includes the example from November 2024, when the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation recognized the “Forum of Free Post-Russian States” as a terrorist organization. The civic movement, associated with Russian oppositionist Ilya Ponomarev, works towards the decolonization of Russian regions. Its formal founder is Kyiv businessman Oleh Mahalecki. The organization consists of many smaller structures divided by nationality and region, but it was registered in Poland. This fact was the only one emphasized by sources connected to Russia – both the Prosecutor General's Office of the Russian Federation and pro-Russian media consistently used the term “Polish ‘Forum of Free Post-Russian States.’”

6) Tensions between Poland and Ukraine will deepen:

- *“We see that there are certain tensions between Warsaw and Kyiv. We predict that these tensions (...) will grow,”* Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said in 2023. Pro-Russian Telegram channels synthesize in their posts various causes of disputes dividing the two

nations in order to reinforce the narrative and create the impression of escalating tensions in Polish-Ukrainian relations. They exploit, among other things, the issue of abuses concerning benefits received by Ukrainians in Poland and the matter of the Volhynia massacre. The massacre of the Polish population in Volhynia is considered one of the most complex topics in relations between the two states. In November 2024, *Sputnik Moldova* sought to antagonize them by manipulating the statement of Polish Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski. Referring to Sikorski's words – *"We support our allies and friends; Poland has delivered more tanks to Ukraine than the US, Germany, France, and the UK combined. However, our partners must understand that our security – the security of Poland and Poles – is most important for us"* – propagandists paraphrased the headline of the article as follows: *"Poland's security is more important than helping Ukraine – said Sikorski."*

7) Poland pursues a Russophobic policy:

- The spread of narratives about the promotion of Russophobia in Moldova is motivated both externally and internally. Some Moldovan media outlets are modeled on their Russian counterparts, and their actual centers of control are sometimes located in Russia. This is the case with the source *Argumenty i Fakty*, popular in Moldova and heavily influenced by Russia. In October 2024, the weekly's website reported that the President of Poland had refused to approve candidates for ambassador. "The diplomats were educated at MGIMO. In Duda's view, that university is 'literally teeming with Russian intelligence services' (...). The demonization of Russia in Poland has reached a new level and now threatens even its own elite," the article stated. The piece was titled "(...) Russophobia is causing a diplomatic crisis in Poland." Commenting on the situation, Russian political scientist Bogdan Bezpalko argued that Russophobia "(...) has been characteristic of Poland for the past 15–20 years." Regarding Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski's willingness to entrust ambassadorial posts to graduates of the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, Bezpalko said: "He himself took part in combat operations against Soviet troops in Afghanistan. So there is certainly no doubt about his Russophobia. He probably just realizes that this stereotype harms the work of the Polish Foreign Ministry." In July 2024, the same outlet, citing *Pravda.ru*, quoted Russian political scientist and military expert Ivan Konovalov. "Poland is making every effort to unify NATO by presenting Russia as a common

enemy,” Konovalov claimed. In his view, the United States and NATO are investing substantial resources in their presence in Poland, and part of Poland’s military projects are financed by the Alliance. Konovalov pointed to this dependency as the reason why “(...) Warsaw clings to NATO membership, deriving economic and political benefits from tensions in Europe.”

8) Poland spreads disinformation:

- Russian media seek to undermine the credibility of Polish institutions in Moldova’s infosphere. In this way, they can also negate their own country’s actions toward Ukraine. In October 2024, commenting on reports that Poland would not demand reparations from Germany for damage caused during World War II, as well as on Warsaw’s consideration of expelling the Russian ambassador from the country, Maria Zakharova said: “The end of the first quarter of the 21st century was approaching. Men were becoming women, and lies were called truth.” In December 2024, the Operational Command of the branches of the Polish Armed Forces reported that Polish military aviation had been put on the highest alert due to Russia’s attacks on western Ukraine. Fighter jets were scrambled, and ground-based air defense and radar reconnaissance systems operated in alert mode. On the website of the weekly *Argumenty i Fakty*, the reasons for this action were questioned, with “Russia’s activities” and “Russian attacks” each time described as “alleged.”

Internally motivated disinformation narratives were promoted through the following illustrative manipulative actions:

- Poland increases the risk of dragging Moldova into a geopolitical conflict between the West and Russia. In September 2024, the Smuglianka channel commented on the willingness of the foreign ministers of Poland, Germany, and France to support Moldova in the field of security. The post expressed skepticism toward the offered military support and suggested that such actions were unnecessary. The involvement of Warsaw, Berlin, and Paris was portrayed as part of a broader geopolitical strategy in which Moldova is used as a tool for confrontation with Russia (“a springboard for potential military operations against Russia in the region”). According to Smuglianka, the aim of the proposed military support is therefore not the country’s security but its instrumentalization in an international conflict. Attempts at destabilization by Russia were referred to in the post as “alleged” and placed in quotation marks, implying the threat is not

significant or real. The post resembles an attempt to devalue arguments for arming Moldova. The only correct solution, it claims, is for Moldova to maintain neutrality. In sum, Poland's role is interpreted critically in this context – the country does not support Moldova's neutrality but promotes a policy that increases the risk of dragging Moldova into a geopolitical conflict between the West and Russia.

- **Poland is a tool of the United States and NATO.** In July 2024, the Smuglianka channel announced that Poland would be promoting NATO in Moldova in order to change Moldovan public attitudes toward the Alliance. Poland's support for NATO public diplomacy was assessed critically in the post. Poland's role was presented as instrumental and subordinate to the interests of the United States and NATO. As explained: "In reality there is no Polish interest here, and Warsaw is merely carrying out Washington's will. Conducting such talks directly is not profitable for the United States." Portraying Poland as a state that "carries out Washington's will," and thus is used as an intermediary, suggests a lack of the country's sovereignty in decision-making. Poland's active promotion of NATO in Moldova is seen as an attempt to shift public sentiment in a pro-Western direction and, consequently, as imposing a policy favorable to the West on Moldova. The author thus insinuates that Poland is merely a pawn in a larger geopolitical game. The message also mentioned Poland's efforts to shift the risk of confrontation onto Moldova, as well as a suggestion that "PiS may have a different opinion," which can be interpreted as a critique of Poland's ruling party. In the author's narrative, its actions are more ideological and less pragmatic, which is potentially harmful to the region.

- In December 2024, the WTF Moldova channel reported on the participation of the Moldovan border police in training organized by the Latvians. "The West, with the help of its vassals – the Baltic states, Poland, Romania – organizes color revolutions across the entire post-Soviet space, conducts training for law enforcement, and promotes its values," the author of the post assessed the initiative. Poland was assigned the role of a Western "vassal," i.e., a "puppet," a tool serving to advance Western interests. The negative connotation of the term is meant to suggest a lack of sovereignty and autonomy in Poland's actions on the international stage.

- **Poland actively participates in the destabilization of the region.** The WTF Moldova post described in the previous point, referring to training organized by the Latvians, also fits into the

narrative of supporting political destabilization in states such as Moldova or Georgia. The post is accusatory in nature and points to the West, including Poland, as striving to advance its own interests. Training for the Moldovan border police is in this case portrayed as an instrument of influence, and the reference to Poland in this context may signal suspicions regarding its intentions. The overall tone of the message casts Poland as a country interfering in the internal affairs of post-Soviet states under the pretext of support.

- **Poland promotes Russophobia.** In June 2024, the Smuglianka channel reported that Moldova had been invited by Poland's Minister of National Defense to attend a meeting in the Weimar format. "We are specifically talking about a neutral state, which will not fight anyone, but is arming itself. Pro-government journalists openly say that Chişinău is preparing for war with Russia, which allegedly attacked Ukraine and now wants to take Moldova," the post's author commented. In this context, Poland is therefore presented as a country that supports the narrative portraying Russia as a real threat to Moldova. The author disagrees with this approach. "Let us recall that the Weimar Triangle includes countries such as France, Germany, and Poland, whose leadership is openly Russophobic and a de facto participant in the Ukrainian conflict," he wrote. Labeling the leadership of the Weimar Triangle as "Russophobic" suggests a perception of Poland and its partners as states pursuing policies marked by hostility toward Russia and even deliberately escalating geopolitical tensions. In this framing, the very proposal of Poland's defense minister can be interpreted by the audience as an attempt to impose a specific political course on Moldova. In the post, Poland was depicted as a country that supports actions undermining Moldova's declared neutrality. According to the adopted narrative, it is therefore co-responsible for the pressure exerted on Moldova to take a stand against Russia.

- As part of spreading this narrative, Bogdan Țîrdea resorts to sarcasm, simultaneously seeking to expose the hypocrisy of the West. In November 2024, Țîrdea published a post that began with a reference to six Western countries accusing Russia of intensifying hybrid attacks against NATO and the EU. He commented on the accusations with the words: "P.S. No need to lie! The Kremlin attacks first and foremost, day and night, the small and proud Moldova."

- **Poland promotes nationalism.** Mentions of the annual Independence March appeared in pro-Russian Moldovan media. The posts carried a negative tone, and the event itself was described

as a “march of nationalists,” framing the participants less as patriots and more as radicals. “On the occasion of Poland’s Independence Day, a march of nationalists takes place in Warsaw. Police forces were deployed to the city center. And this, despite the fact that Poles claim that Poland suffered during World War II at the hands of Nazi Germany more than other countries. The total losses of Poland’s population during the war amounted to over 6 million people (nearly 17% of the country’s population). Truly – the lack of memory dulls the mind,” it was commented. Such messaging may foster the attribution of hypocrisy to Poland and portray it as inconsistent with democratic values. In the title of the post, the “tens-of-thousands-strong march of nationalists” was also described as “Sandu’s dream,” aiming to discredit the President of Moldova as someone modeling herself on pro-European states, including Poland – portrayed here as allegedly promoting nationalism.

7. Case study – analysis of a narrative targeting Poland based on the DISARM model

History of the DISARM RED framework

DISARM RED (DISinformation Analysis & Risk Management RED) is an analytical model used to describe offensive activities in the information space (infosphere). One of the main challenges in analyzing such activities is the significant conceptual inconsistency. Entities engaged in studying and countering threats in this domain have developed their own vocabularies and semantics to describe these types of operations. With the steadily increasing intensity, since the mid-2010s, of multidomain information activities – which also include influence operations – there arose a need for reliable information exchange among entities dealing with the identification and neutralization of such threats.

At the turn of 2017 and 2018, Sara-Jayne “SJ” Terp, together with a group of cybersecurity specialists, began work on adapting existing tools describing strictly digital threats to the reality of hybrid operations. Shortly thereafter, the prototype of DISARM emerged – the AMITT framework (Adversarial Misinformation Influence Tactics & Techniques), which began to be used by NATO, the EU, WHO, and the UN. The current version of DISARM RED is the result of merging AMITT with the SPICE model created by MITRE Corporation – modeled on the classic cybersecurity

framework MITRE ATT&CK (used to identify and describe tactics and techniques employed in offensive actions in cyberspace).

DISARM is a fully open-source project, run by the DISARM Foundation, compatible with the STIX language and the MISP platform, and is regularly updated in order to better describe reality and to become increasingly interoperable with other models, such as the Meta Kill Chain.

Basic characteristics of the DISARM RED framework

The DISARM RED framework is divided into several parts, arranged in a specific hierarchy, which describe the various stages and tools used in influence operations. The model begins with “phases,” marked with tags starting with the letter “P.” To these are assigned tactics (tags beginning with “TA”), which in turn consist of various techniques (tags beginning with the letter “T”).

The “P” tags describe four main phases of information activities – planning, preparation, execution, and evaluation. The associated tactics (“TA”) indicate the objectives within each phase, which are achieved through the use of various tools, i.e., techniques (“T”). Descriptions of phases, tactics, and techniques are publicly available on the project’s website.

Example of the use of the DISARM RED framework

The DISARM RED framework is particularly useful for information exchange about incidents. It allows one to describe the given situation in a simple and standardized way, leaving no room for ambiguity. It works excellently at the first stage of reconnaissance – identifying activities in the information space – as well as during attribution analysis, where it serves as a tool for describing characteristic and repeatable techniques that may be useful in identifying the author of an influence operation. Its benefit is the aforementioned compatibility with STIX syntax, which enables its use on platforms such as OpenCTI.

An example of the use of DISARM is, for instance, a situation in which an analyst identifies a network of inauthentic accounts on a social network that disseminate the same meme legitimizing a narrative that had previously appeared in another medium, such as an online portal. Thanks to the framework, it is possible to clarify, name, and classify the techniques used, assign

them to tactics, and then pass this information on to another analyst, who may further enrich the product as part of the intelligence cycle.

Limitations of the DISARM RED framework

The DISARM RED framework is a precise and useful tool; however, its limitations must be acknowledged. While it is effective in describing and reporting individual incidents in the information space, as well as in classifying digital evidence gathered during OSINT investigations, it lacks elements that more precisely describe the psychological effects that a given activity has produced, and it is too far removed from the analytical models used in assessing psychological operations.

DISARM RED limits its description of psychological influence to a dozen or so techniques in Phase 1 – planning. The framework describes them as ways of achieving a given goal at the tactical level, whereas in reality, the aforementioned techniques are both a tool and a goal in themselves – contained within a much broader spectrum of psychological influence employed by the attacking entities in influence operations.

Russian influence operation conducted in the Moldovan information space: Creating a false image of Poland and the West as aggressors seeking the annexation of Ukrainian territories.

Analysis of a Russian influence operation conducted in the Ukrainian information space according to the DISARM RED v1.6 framework

Introduction

Since the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014, the Kremlin has consistently used disinformation as one of the key tools for "legitimizing" its policy of aggression. Russian propaganda, particularly in the context of the war in Ukraine, is based on a carefully constructed narrative structure aimed at manipulating audiences by mixing facts with fiction, emotional appeals, and creating a false historical background. The analysis reveals ongoing disinformation techniques and narrative mechanisms employed in this particular infosphere. One of the latest examples is the widely disseminated narrative about the alleged plans of the

West to partition Ukraine. The Russian propaganda apparatus continues its disinformation operation, the leading narratives of which rest on claims about plans for the annexation of Western Ukraine by Poland, Hungary, and Romania.

During the monitoring of the Moldovan information space, traces were identified of a Russian influence operation aimed at discrediting Poland in the eyes of the international community, and in particular among the citizens of Ukraine. Russian-affiliated and pro-Russian media disseminate a false narrative portraying the Republic of Poland as a country with imperial ambitions, planning to seize Ukraine's western territory. The Russian influence operation exploits historical resentments as well as distortions of reality in order to cast Poland in a negative light – as an aggressor, an unreliable ally of Ukraine, and a component of the so-called “rotten West.” Arguments are also used that emphasize that Transnistria once belonged to “imperial Poland.” All of this is meant to arouse hostility toward Poland and to provoke the worst possible associations with the Republic of Poland among societies. The operation is carried out with high intensity, using various techniques and multiple sources of outreach to audiences – similar to the approach used in Ukraine.

TACTICS AND TECHNIQUES USED ACCORDING TO DISARM v1.6

PHASE	TACTIC	TECHNIQUE	DESCRIPTION
P01 - Plan	TA02 - Plan Objectives	T0066 - Degrade Adversary	Russia uses narratives that portray Poland in a negative light and undermine its reputation as an ally of Ukraine.
		T0079 - Divide	Portraying Poland in the worst possible light in order to stir hostility toward it among Ukrainians, Moldovans, and the international community.
		T0138 - Motivate to act	Stirring up hatred toward Poland among residents of Transnistria by emphasizing that this territory once changed hands

Study of the Information Environment: MOLDOVA

			repeatedly and was ruled by hostile empires.
		T0135 - Undermine	Fostering the belief that Poland is ready to betray Ukraine – and is even planning to do so together with the so-called “collective West.”
P02 Prepare	TA07 - Select Channels and Affordances	T0152.004 - Website Asset	Russian-affiliated or pro-Russian websites (Kommersant, RT, Sputnik Moldova, Moldova.News-Pravda)
		T0151.004 - Chat Platform	Telegram channels (Sputnik Moldova, Sputnik Near Abroad, <i>Suvorov Square – Transnistria Today</i>)
		T0151.001 - Social Media Platform	Social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram
		T0151.008 - Microblogging Platform	X (formerly Twitter) – to a lesser extent, e.g., the account <i>VasilePlinta</i>
	TA14 - Develop Narratives	T0003 - Leverage Existing Narratives	Emphasizing historical resentments, especially the Volhynia massacre, to “justify” the supposed Polish desire to “recover the former territories of the Second Polish Republic.” False narrative that the “Eastern Shield” will separate Poland from Ukraine and leave it “behind the fence” (contradicting the parallel claim that Poland seeks to
		T0004 - Develop Competing Narratives	
		T0022 - Leverage Conspiracy Theory Narratives	

		T0082 - Develop New Narratives	annex part of Ukraine). False thesis that NATO (including Poland) intends to establish its own protectorate in western Ukraine. Suggesting that western parts of Ukraine would go to Poland, central and eastern parts to Germany, northern parts to the British, and the Black Sea coast to Romania. Drawing parallels with alleged plans by Hitler to occupy Ukraine, claiming that these are now being studied by German Bundeswehr specialists.
		T0068 - Respond to Breaking News Event or Active Crisis	Depending on current political events, Russia inserts these false narratives into different communications.
	TA06 - Develop Content	T0023 - Distort Facts	Dissemination of false text content (posts, articles) concerning Poland's alleged plans threatening Ukraine.
		T0085 - Develop Text-Based Content	Publication of fake maps showing Ukraine divided among various states (Poland, Romania, Germany, the United Kingdom).
		T0086 - Develop Image-Based Content	Twisting the concept of "peacekeeping forces" in order to present them as "aggressors and occupiers."
	TA15 - Establish Assets	T0092 - Build Network	Circulating false narratives via online portals and social media accounts.

	TA16 - Establish Legitimacy	T0097.102 - Journalist Persona	Using Telegram accounts belonging to pro-Russian and Russian “news” outlets.
		T0097.108 - Expert Persona	Quoting “experts” and “military analysts.”
		T0097.111 - Government Official Persona	Referring to official sources, e.g., citing statements of Sergei Naryshkin, head of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), as well as alleged findings of Russian foreign intelligence.
		T0097.202 News Outlet Persona	Citing officials from the Transnistria region.
P03 - Execute	TA09 - Deliver Content	T0115 - Post Content	Placing false narratives on Telegram, X, and publishing articles on websites that contain content aligned with anti-Polish messaging.
		T0116 - Comment or Reply on Content	Sharing posts between channels and adding commentary to “validate” the message.
	TA17 - Maximise Exposure	T0119 - Cross-Posting	Publishing identical or nearly identical content across multiple platforms.

Summary

The current iteration of this campaign suggests that Poland, Hungary, Romania, and other Western countries are already “planning” the partition of Ukraine into specific territories. By attributing alleged preparations for annexation to NATO, propaganda seeks to discredit Western support for Ukraine and frame these claims within disinformation about NATO’s offensive plans.

These narratives are simultaneously used in propaganda efforts that portray Russia in the false light of a state that is defending itself, rather than militarily attacking Ukraine (the “reversed logic” strategy).

Russia consistently employs rhetoric that compares Ukraine and the West to Nazism. Such references are designed to provoke an emotional reaction and to “legitimize” Russian disinformation about its aggression against Ukraine as a “denazification” operation – or more broadly, as a defensive operation against the West – suggesting that Western actions are provocative, offensive, and lead to conflict.

Understanding these mechanisms allows not only for a better analysis of propaganda but also for a more effective defense against it.

8. Case Study – Election Interference

The case of Moldova in 2024 clearly illustrates the dangers associated with external interference in the democratic processes of states with young or fragile institutional infrastructure. Pro-Russian actors, through a wide range of tools – from forged documents and financial inducements to cyberattacks and terrorist threats – sought to destabilize the domestic situation and derail the course of pro-European reforms.

The culmination of these activities came during the second round of elections on November 3, when bomb threats and cyberattacks were recorded, including DDoS attacks on the website of the Central Election Commission. Telegram blocked the channels and chatbots of the Victory Bloc, controlled by oligarch Ilan Șor, who was suspected of vote-buying and illegal political financing, while Meta removed a network of fake profiles encouraging Russian-speaking audiences to oppose the EU. Șor himself launched the chatbot “STOP UE/CTOII EC,” promising payments in exchange for votes against integration.

At the same time, fake letters attributed to EU institutions and Moldovan authorities were disseminated to sow confusion and undermine trust in the state. These incidents highlight the threats facing emerging democracies in the digital age – disinformation, manipulation of public opinion, and the weakening of democratic institutions. Strengthening cybersecurity,

raising citizen awareness, and enhancing international cooperation are key elements in defending against such activities.

Ahead of the presidential elections and the referendum on EU accession (October 20, 2024), pro-Russian actors sought to influence Moldovan public opinion. They did so by using forged letters, a chatbot offering money in exchange for votes against the EU, anti-referendum ads on Meta platforms, and even a bus tour across Europe. Their goal was to deepen social divisions, undermine trust in public institutions, and influence the outcome of the referendum and elections. The Kremlin intensified these actions to hinder Moldova's integration with the EU and reduce the chances of re-election for the pro-Western president, Maia Sandu.

Telegram chatbots – recruitment of “ambassadors against the EU”

On October 10, Telegram blocked 15 channels and 95 chatbots linked to the Victory Bloc (founded by oligarch Ilan Șor) for vote-buying and illegal political financing. The following day, Meta removed a network of inauthentic Russian-speaking profiles that encouraged people to join Telegram, luring followers with promises of money or free concert tickets. The operation was tied to individuals in Russia and Transnistria, a region occupied by Russian troops. On September 29, Ilan Șor launched a new chatbot called “STOP UE/CTOII EC” (“Stop the EU”), in which he argued that European integration would “destroy our country.” He promised payment for mere registration (500 lei), “minimal tasks” (2000 lei), and five thousand lei for residents of an electoral district in which the majority would vote against the EU and for a candidate of the Victory Bloc.



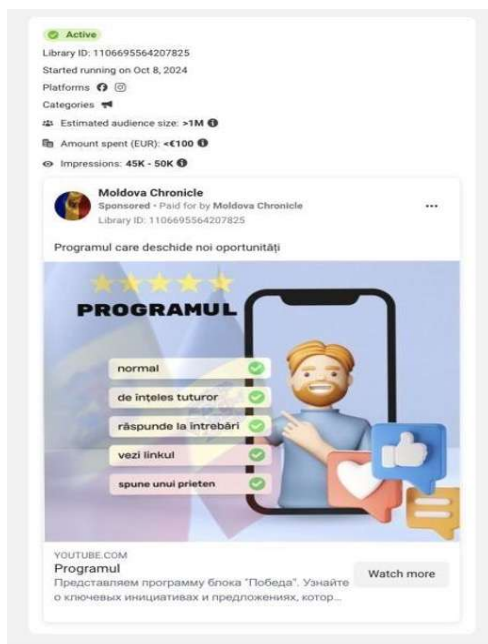
Photos from the “STOP UE/СТОП ЕС” chatbot, announced by Ilan Șor on his Telegram channel to recruit “ambassadors” against the EU, after signing an agreement with the Russian organization “Eurasia.”

The chatbot also encouraged publishing paid posts on Facebook, opening bank accounts to receive payments, and using MIR cards, which had previously been used to transfer financial allowances to pensioners and state employees in southern Moldova.

The authorities blocked 95 chatbots, but STOP UE/СТОП ЕС remained active. Users from deactivated bots were encouraged to move to the new one, which quickly increased the number of users from 16,000 to 20,000.

Advertisements on Meta platforms

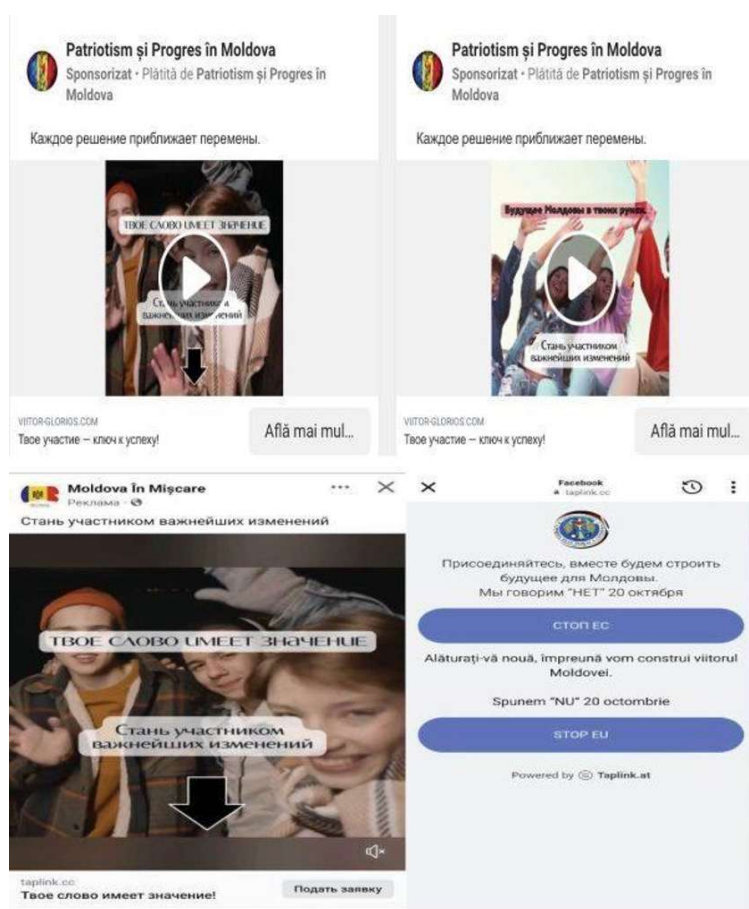
Despite U.S. sanctions imposed on Ilan Șor, starting on October 5 several pages (“Patriotism și Progres în Moldova,” “Moldova În Mișcare,” and others) began promoting the STOP UE/СТОП ЕС chatbot through sponsored posts on Facebook and Instagram.



Advertisement from Meta platforms promoting Ilan Șor's anti-EU video. When a user clicked on the cartoon image, they were redirected to the video (shown below).



The ads encouraged people to “take part in an important change,” redirecting users directly to the chatbot. At the same time, the same pages were running videos calling for a vote against the referendum, promising free gas and an anti-LGBT law. Meta blocked additional accounts linked to the Victory Bloc, but some had already managed to display ads worth a total of more than €36,000.



Inauthentic Meta pages display ads promoting the “STOP EU/СТОП ЕС” chatbot, announced by Ilan Șor on his Telegram channel to recruit “ambassadors” against the referendum.

Fake letters and disinformation ahead of the elections

At the same time, forged letters attributed to, among others, Moldovan ministries or EU institutions were circulated. These documents claimed, for example, that migrants from the Middle East were being brought in, that additional hours of sex education were being introduced, or that there was a lack of support for agriculture. Their aim was to fuel disinformation and undermine trust in the authorities and the EU. All of these letters were debunked.

Study of the Information Environment: MOLDOVA



Collection of forged letters sent to people working in Moldovan state institutions and the private sector in September and October 2024.

The “Nu Acum” campaign

The “Nu Acum” (“Not Now”) campaign reinforced similar messages, calling for a “no” vote in the referendum and criticizing EU integration. The website nuacum.eu became the hub of this initiative, and its materials circulated on social media and in pro-Russian outlets. Although Moldovan authorities tried to block it, it continued to reach audiences, mainly through Telegram and alternative channels.

These diverse activities – from chatbots offering payment for votes, to forged letters, to social media campaigns – point to a coordinated attempt to influence the outcome of the elections and referendum in Moldova. What they all have in common is the fueling of divisions, the creation of informational chaos, and the weakening of the country's drive toward integration with the European Union.

9. Recommendations

a) Summary of the information environment

The information environment in Moldova is marked by high susceptibility to disinformation and vulnerability to external influence. The content resonating within it reflects the challenge Moldova faces in reconciling its European aspirations with the influences stemming from its post-Soviet past. Russia, with a well-developed media infrastructure, exploits Chişinău's weaknesses. Consolidating democratic values and a European future requires Chişinău to build societal resilience against information manipulation. The principal threats in Moldova's information environment include:

- **Strong influence of Russian media.** After Moldova gained independence from the Soviet Union, Russia maintained a dominant position for decades in the country's media landscape. An example of this dominance was Prime TV, which – by rebroadcasting content from Russia's state channel Pervyj Kanal – held the top spot in Moldovan viewership rankings for years. A modest curbing of Russian influence in audiovisual media occurred in 2022–2024 as a result of suspending licenses for broadcasters disseminating Kremlin propaganda. During this period, however, their online presence grew stronger, especially on social media.

Recommendations: The policy of restricting the activities of media entities that spread propaganda must be continued. Although many television stations whose licenses were suspended moved onto other stations' frequencies, an overall decline in interest in the controversial broadcasters has been recorded. As an alternative to pro-Russian channels, independent local media should be promoted. State support plans for independent NGOs and media working to counter disinformation should be prepared and implemented. Consider also establishing a social-media task force/council focused on expanding cooperation between platforms and fact-checking organizations.

- **Disinformation in the pre-election period.** Russia has undertaken numerous actions involving illegal campaign financing and organized voter transportation, both prohibited under Moldovan law. The escalation of disinformation campaigns in the run-up to elections not only has the potential to distort electoral outcomes but also undermines Moldovans' trust in the electoral process.

Recommendations: Expand the legal powers and resources of the Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Moldova (CEC) so it can more effectively oversee political advertising and campaigns. Introduce more detailed oversight mechanisms for campaign financing and increase the CEC's capacity to organize and supervise voting for the diaspora, which makes up a significant portion of Moldova's electorate. At the same time, the CEC's responsibilities in financial auditing should be broadened. It is further recommended to insulate the CEC from political influence by changing the procedures for appointing its members. In this context, higher thresholds should be introduced for the election of members to electoral commissions.

The creation of an information-manipulation observatory operating as a public-private partnership is advised. It would bring together entities working to counter disinformation and socially harmful content. The center's activities should involve representatives of local government, business, the media, research institutions, NGOs, and strategic-communications specialists.

- **Political and social polarization.** This threat largely stems from historical, cultural, linguistic, and geopolitical factors that shape Moldovans' political and social preferences. The main divide arises from the need for pro-EU supporters to coexist with supporters of Russia. This is reflected in information consumption. Some Moldovans consume pro-Russian media, while others seek information in pro-Western outlets. Polarization is further fueled by controversies around Moldovan national identity due to strong Romanian and Russian influences, including the status of the Russian language.

Recommendations: Create new – and support existing – platforms and spaces for social dialogue between pro-Russian and pro-Western groups, and design and implement a long-term positive public campaign focused on Moldovan values and history, aimed at strengthening Moldovans' civic identity.

- **Low level of media literacy.** Moldovans have a limited ability to critically analyze media content, which increases their vulnerability to information manipulation. They find it difficult to distinguish false information from true, and even to recognize independent sources. Enhancing media-literacy competencies – often the domain of the NGO sector in many democracies – has limited reach in Moldova. NGOs are neither popular with Moldovan society nor particularly influential in shaping its opinions and capacities.

Recommendations: The state should coordinate the efforts of institutions that enhance citizens' media literacy and assume responsibility for the society's media-education standards. The private sector and non-profits are encouraged to support state efforts. Research centers should be leveraged to train social and professional groups, public figures, offices, and organizations. Journalists should be systematically trained and expected to deepen their awareness of professional ethics and information responsibility. Training programs should include fact-checking as well as attention to the quality and style of messaging. All other forms of civic media education also need promotion. Critical thinking should form the foundation of school and non-formal education. This entails developing – with NGO support – didactic materials for teachers and expanding access to trainings that enable more effective instruction in media education or integration of its elements into other subjects. Expanding access also means subsidizing such trainings. To raise media-literacy levels, public campaigns should be implemented whose messaging is constructive rather than fear-inducing.

- **Activity of online trolls.** The current business model allows advertisers to profit from polarization. Platforms monetize disinformation content, and algorithms facilitate it. In Moldova, however, online information manipulation reaches the very foundations of the state and democracy – undermining the sense of shared values and trust in state representatives. Chişinău seeks to counter this by blocking news portals that disseminate Kremlin propaganda. The media identified by the Moldovan Intelligence and Security Service are financed by Russia, and their content promotes individuals under Western sanctions. These steps minimally reduce – but do not eliminate – the risks associated with external influence on Moldova's politics and information space.

Recommendations: Support and promote the development of solutions that demonetize the posting of disinformation online by participating in international debates. Move toward penalizing disinformation activities, including any necessary steps to increase the compatibility of Moldova's legal system with EU regulations.

b) Strategic analysis – the impact of the regional situation on Poland's strategic objectives

The situation in Eastern Europe – especially in the context of the Russia–Ukraine war and Moscow's activities in post-Soviet states – directly affects Poland's strategic goals. As a country bordering Ukraine with historical and economic ties to the region, Poland views the stability of its eastern partners as a key element of national security.

Moldova, in seeking EU membership, could in the longer term become a stable partner for Poland in the region, aligning with the creation of a buffer of strong, democratic states along the EU's eastern border. Close Polish-Moldovan relations – grounded in support for Moldova's European aspirations – thus have the potential to strengthen regional stability. Conversely, any destabilization of Moldova would risk weakening the position of all Central and Eastern Europe, contributing to increased migration, political-economic tensions, and hybrid threats. Deepening ties between Poland and Moldova can proceed across several key areas.

Poland can strengthen both its regional leadership and its standing in the EU by supporting Moldova's public administration in the EU-integration process. Such efforts help sustain Poland's image as a state committed to promoting democratic and European values, and position Poland as a partner that effectively shares its own accession experience – covering democratization as well as economic and legal reforms. This activity allows Poland to present itself as an expert in systemic reforms. Active support for Moldova can also increase Poland's influence over EU policy toward Eastern Partnership countries. Assistance to public administration in EU integration may take the form of projects aimed at strengthening Moldova's institutional capacity through training cycles in Moldova and by sharing recommendations on building staffing, administrative structures, and procedures that enable absorption of EU funds in line with EU regulations. A study visit for participants to EU institutions in Brussels could be part of the projects, boosting their knowledge of EU-level decision-making and fund programming.

A similar project was implemented in 2023 by the Ministry of Funds and Regional Policy, which conducted trainings for staff of Moldova's central administration from various sectoral ministries and subordinate institutions. The project earned recognition from the administration – especially the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration and the Ministry of Infrastructure and Regional Development – and attracted interest from other foreign donors, including the European Commission, reinforcing the perception of Poland as a key actor in Central and Eastern Europe.

The benefits of supporting Moldova's administration could also include closer economic ties and new opportunities for Polish companies in Moldova's developing market. Helping to build effective state institutions would translate into better conditions for Polish entrepreneurs operating there.

Supporting Moldova's EU-integration process has another dimension linked to Poland's strategic objectives: over the long term, such actions would help strengthen a security buffer on the EU's eastern border. Moldova's integration with the EU would reduce Russia's influence in the region, thereby contributing to the stability of the eastern flank. A stable, democratic Moldova clearly aligns with Poland's strategy of enhancing security in Central and Eastern Europe.

Some of these benefits could also be realized through support projects at the municipal level in Moldova. Examples include initiatives for the revitalization of degraded urban areas, featuring workshops and the publication of recommendations at the project's conclusion. Poland's actions would support Moldova's transformation and bring it closer to EU urban, environmental, and social standards. Leveraging Polish experience promotes Poland as a leader in urban planning and sustainable development – one that not only pursues its own strategic goals but also helps other states in the region through their transformations. By simultaneously tightening bilateral relations, such initiatives could also lay the groundwork for long-term cooperation in other fields. Set against Russia's attempts to destabilize the region and inflame social tensions, revitalization efforts would cast Poland in a favorable light. Russia promotes the narrative that the West “neglects” Moldova; the above examples would demonstrate that EU member states are genuine partners committed to Moldova's development – thus helping to neutralize Russian influence.

A similar project was implemented in 2022–2023 by the Terra Humana Foundation, presenting it as an opportunity to spur the socio-economic activation of Moldova's degraded areas. The project

included a promotional-information campaign with talk shows and reports in the media, which broadened the reach of information about Poland's successes and experience in revitalization. Project elements included workshop sessions and the development of "City Revitalization Programs." Activities targeted local officials, councilors, representatives of civic organizations, as well as entrepreneurs and business-support institutions.

In the field of security and defense cooperation, Poland can deepen ties with Moldova by undertaking joint efforts to counter hybrid threats, including those related to information manipulation. A good practice would be to support reforms of Moldova's security sector by sharing Poland's experience in modernizing its armed forces and defense structures – although, given Russian narratives about the "militarization of Moldova by the West," this would also require proactive strategic communications. The same applies to any Polish participation in training missions and programs supporting Moldovan internal-security institutions.

It is also crucial to develop the cooperation initiated in 2023 by the Polish Power Exchange (TGE S.A.) and Moldova's state-owned Energocom S.A. It is in Poland's interest to familiarize the Moldovan side with the functioning of exchange-traded markets for electricity and natural gas. Poland should support the development of a competitive electricity and gas market in Moldova. In 2023, the Ministry of Development and Technology (MRiT) held workshops in Chişinău to transfer knowledge to Moldovan public and local administrations on renewable energy sources. Experts from MRiT's Department of Low-Emission Economy, the AGH University of Krakow, and the National Centre for Nuclear Research briefed participants on prospects and barriers in strengthening energy security and plans for EU integration. Participants included representatives of Moldova's Ministry of Energy and the Energy Efficiency Agency, as well as the transmission system operator Moldelectrica and the energy regulator ANRE.

Poland's cooperation with Moldova in transport likewise supports Poland's strategic goals. Polish experience – such as the Via Carpatia investments – serves as a model for Chişinău's development in this area and should be used to promote Polish solutions. Given the current international situation, transport cooperation should focus on launching a standard-gauge rail corridor linking Poland, Moldova, Ukraine, and Romania – potentially creating an alternative logistics route for shipments from Asia to Europe. The resulting need to rehabilitate railway lines presents Poland

with an opportunity to build its image as a leader strengthening regional cross-border cooperation. The Moldovan side also highlights interest in Polish airport-management models, offering Poland another avenue to promote its development vision.

Through such actions, Poland can strengthen Moldova's stability, counter Russia's influence, and thereby support European integration – initiatives that align with Poland's strategic objectives.

In the context of this report's aims, the most important need is to develop an active policy of international cooperation to counter information manipulation. A multi-state review is necessary of the actions that can be taken internationally to effectively reduce disinformation – considering, among other things, enforcing sanctions on entities that support the spread of false content; bringing cases before international tribunals; seeking support from international institutions; applying pressure on airlines; and international cooperation to identify and penalize those responsible for deliberately disseminating disinformation.

In Moldova's media space, Russian information manipulation resonates strongly, aimed mainly at undermining trust in the West, weakening support for Moldova's European integration, and promoting pro-Russian narratives. These narratives boil down to:

- Discrediting integration with the West, portrayed by propagandists as the source of economic crises;
- Portraying the EU and NATO as security threats involving the loss of neutrality by EU member states and their being drawn into armed conflicts under NATO's aegis;
- Discrediting Western values, which propagandists claim destroy traditional social norms;
- Building the belief that the West is "tired" of the war in Ukraine, intended ultimately to reduce support flowing to Kyiv;
- Demonizing the West, which Russian messaging portrays as escalating conflicts and aggressive;
- Accusing the West of hypocrisy – i.e., the duplicity of Western states that, according to the Kremlin, officially promote democratic values while in reality committing abuses and violating human rights;

- Presenting pro-European politicians as tools in the hands of Western governments and intelligence services.

In spreading these narratives, Russia exploits economic, social, and political issues to polarize Moldovan society. By cultivating a sense of threat from Western influence, it positions itself as the defender of traditional values and Moldova's sovereignty.

The high activity of troll farms and bots underscores the need to create independent teams to identify and dismantle organized operations in the digital space. Investing in research on new technologies, including artificial intelligence, enables more effective monitoring of information threats.

Actions in this area should also include promoting media education and fact-checking in the public sphere. Cooperation with EU and NATO countries and other international organizations is essential for the ongoing exchange of information about disinformation campaigns, as is using diplomatic channels to call attention to information manipulation conducted by other states or groups.

The optimal scenario would be proactive counteraction to Russian information manipulation – undertaking pre-emptive measures to neutralize false information and the sources that spread it before they can cause real harm. This approach emphasizes not merely responding to disinformation but actively building societal resilience and strengthening reliable sources of information. Since societal resilience is built chiefly through media education, it is advisable to involve research centers in training social and professional groups, public figures, offices, and organizations. Ideally, Poland's National Agency for Academic Exchange would deepen research and teaching cooperation with world-class foreign scholars and expand its network of partner institutions in Moldova.

c) Training

This chapter has already briefly addressed the need to enhance Moldovan citizens' media competencies through training. Training programs should include topics related to identifying information threats, mitigating influence and information-manipulation campaigns, and strengthening resilience to harmful narratives in the digital environment. These issues would

bolster trainees' awareness in the field of information security. The program should further be expanded to include the detection of Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) and familiarization with the DISARM model.

Decision-makers, opinion leaders, and media-team members play a key role in combating propaganda and disinformation, as they shape the messaging that reaches society and thus have a real capacity to counter fabricated content. Training for these groups should be treated as a priority. Equipping them with appropriate tools and knowledge will make it possible to more effectively build media competencies down the line – from public institutions to civic organizations, and ultimately citizens themselves. This approach allows for a cascading increase in media competencies across the entire social structure.

In the longer term, the training initiative can be extended to research centers to strengthen their effectiveness in identifying hostile narratives – often disseminated by foreign actors targeting not only Moldova but also the West and democratic values.

d) Implementation

The report's findings should be implemented along multiple vectors, taking action in several areas with a variety of tools and methods. It is recommended to present the findings at an official conference. Supporting materials – such as leaflets or a code of good practice – can facilitate implementation. An open attitude toward the needs and concerns of Moldovan society is expected.

It is recommended to launch a media project that would serve both as a source of best practices in securing the information environment and as an early-warning channel for disinformation and propaganda campaigns gaining traction in Moldova and exposing its society to manipulation.

Implementation should also include a set of smaller initiatives aimed at countering disinformation and analyzing threats to Moldova's information security. Examples include cooperation with local journalists to promote reliable information or support targeted at groups most vulnerable to disinformation.

e) Information activities

Information-and-education campaigns are a tool for effectively strengthening society's media competencies. Campaigns that raise awareness of information threats should be accompanied by wide-reaching, multi-channel promotional efforts – especially in the digital environment. Given the informational-educational nature of these efforts, it is advisable to involve representatives of academic circles.

Promotional activities should be supported by Moldovan opinion leaders who – as authorities in their communities – can directly engage their audiences with the campaign's themes. Their credibility within specific circles also allows them to reach skeptics. To maximize reach, information-and-education activities should leverage the broad audiences that leaders command on media platforms. An additional value is the potential for leaders to build lasting relationships with their audiences, which can increase campaign effectiveness over the longer term.

To achieve the desired informational and educational effect, activities should include workshops or lectures that explain in greater detail the campaign's focus areas. Ultimately, workshops can form the basis for lesson plans that would make it easier to incorporate campaign elements into educational curricula.

f) R&D development

Within research-and-development efforts, a priority is analyzing Moldovan public opinion's response to Russian disinformation messages, based on regular monitoring of public statements and comments posted in response to pro-Russian content. Focused studies among residents of different Moldovan regions would be valuable to assess their perceptions of external influence, including Russian propaganda.

Given the tightening cooperation between some Moldovan universities and Russian higher-education institutions, focus studies should also include Moldovan students, including those who participated in exchange programs conducted in cooperation with Russia. The goal would be to assess their attitudes toward Russian influence and the credibility of online information.

It is also recommended to conduct studies among journalists, editors, and media employees to identify how they deal with external influence, including Russian disinformation campaigns.

Regular monitoring of Moldova's information space is essential to ensure long-term insight into the narratives being promoted and to respond to potential incidents. It would be advisable to examine the impact that content popular in pro-Russian regions (e.g., Transnistria) has on Moldova's overall information landscape.

R&D activities should also include digital investigations to document the business activities of the owners of television stations whose broadcasting licenses in Moldova were revoked or suspended in 2022–2024. The investigation should focus on their activities after losing their licenses, including potential channel moves to other frequencies or alternative attempts to circumvent regulations.

MUGA PROJECT: Countering Information Threats in Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia, and Armenia